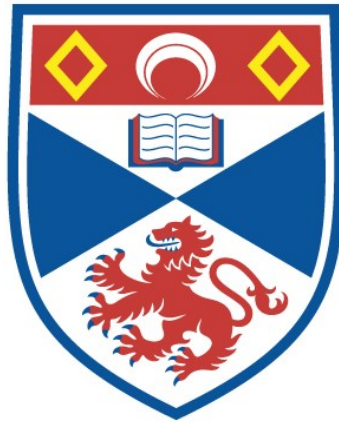


ALAIN, "PHILOSOPHE-POÈTE"

Jane M. Henderson

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews



1997

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30th December 1976

I hereby declare that the following Thesis is based on work carried out by me, that the Thesis is my own composition, and that no part of it has been presented previously for a higher degree.

The research was carried out in the Department of French of the University of St. Andrews, and in Paris.

21st January 1977

ABSTRACT of Thesis,      ALAIN, "PHILOSOPHE -- POÈTE"

Submitted to the University of St. Andrews in January 1977,

by Jane M. Henderson, M.A.

The central theme of this thesis is Alain's insight into the nature of the cognitive experience of literature. Aware that subjective and non-analytical factors have their part to play in all forms of knowledge, Alain grew increasingly hostile to the type of philosophy characterised by what he believed was an exaggerated use of the scientific method. The introduction shows that Alain was not the only philosopher of his day to point to the potential superiority of literature over philosophy as a form of knowledge. The ensuing chapters suggest, however, that he went further than most of his contemporaries<sup>or</sup> in probing the specific nature of the mental activities involved in the creation and appreciation of works of literature.

The first chapter is an investigation of Alain's working method and of the epistemological assumptions behind it. This is followed by a chapter on language and one on Alain's own style in which it is suggested that his poetic attitude, shown in his respect for the obscurity and expressive ambiguity of the word, can be of greater cognitive value than the more restrictive attitude of most philosophers towards language.

The next chapter is a discussion of Alain's criteria of criticism in literary matters and it reveals his hostility towards those writers who do not share his conviction that the task of the creative writer is one of exploring the world through the reality embodied in language itself. In his own literary commentaries, Alain condemns those who misconceive the nature of their medium and merely express pre-conceived ideas in literary form. His belief, discussed in the same chapter, that great works of literature constitute a world of <sup>expression</sup> ~~experience~~ which cannot be explained, attests once again to Alain's conviction that purely /

purely logical discourse is inadequate in the face of lived experience.

The final chapter shows how Alain considers that literary works, which offer cognitive experience in the form of subjective truths apprehended in the reading relationship, are of much greater value to man in his quest for knowledge than the works of psychologists or moralists whose aim is to prove or demonstrate some truth about human nature.

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For three years (1971-1974) I was supported by a St. Andrews University Research scholarship and I am pleased to acknowledge the debt owed to this award.

J.M.H.

## Abbreviations

Works by Alain figuring repeatedly in the footnotes are, for convenience, referred to by the following abbreviated forms:

<u>A.D.</u>	<u>Les Arts et les Dieux</u> (Bibliothèque de la Fléiade, Gallimard 1958)	
<u>H.P.</u>	<u>Histoire de mes Pensées</u>	} these works all appear in <u>A.D.</u>
<u>S.B.A.</u>	<u>Système des Beaux-Arts</u>	
<u>V.L.</u>	<u>Vingt Leçons sur les Beaux-Arts</u>	
<u>E.S.</u>	<u>Entretiens chez le Sculpteur</u>	
<u>L.D.M.</u>	<u>Lettres au Docteur Mondor sur le Sujet du Cœur et de l'Esprit</u>	
<u>St.</u>	<u>Stendhal</u>	
<u>Dick.</u>	<u>En lisant Dickens</u>	
<u>A.B.</u>	<u>Avec Balzac</u>	
<u>Déf.</u>	<u>Définitions</u>	
<u>F.M.</u>	<u>Préliminaires à la Mythologie</u>	
<u>D.</u>	<u>Les Dieux</u>	
<u>P.S.</u>	<u>Les Passions et la Sagesse</u> (Bibliothèque de la Fléiade, Gallimard 1960)	
<u>I.A.</u>	<u>Les Idées et les Ages</u>	} these works all appear in <u>P.S.</u>
<u>A.C.</u>	<u>Les Aventures du Cœur</u>	
<u>S.J.L.</u>	<u>Souvenirs concernant Jules Lagneau</u>	
<u>Sl. Cha.</u>	<u>51 Chapitres sur l'Esprit et les Passions</u>	
<u>M.B.M.</u>	<u>Entretiens au Bord de la Mer</u>	
<u>Propos I</u>	<u>Propos</u> (Bibliothèque de la Fléiade, Gallimard 1956 /Vol. I/	
<u>Propos II</u>	and 1970 /Vol. II/)	
<u>P.L.</u>	<u>Propos de Littérature</u> (Hartmann 1934)	
<u>P.B.</u>	<u>Propos sur le Bonheur</u> (Gallimard 1928)	
<u>P.Ed.</u>	<u>Propos sur l'Education</u> (Meder 1932)	
<u>P.R.</u>	<u>Propos sur la Religion</u> (PUF 1957)	
<u>P.Phil.</u>	<u>Propos sur deux Philosophes</u> (PUF 1961)	
<u>P.Est.</u>	<u>Préliminaires à l'Esthétique</u> (Gallimard 1939)	
<u>S.E.</u>	<u>Saisons de l'Esprit</u> (Gallimard 1937)	
<u>V.E.</u>	<u>Vigiles de l'Esprit</u> (Gallimard 1942)	
<u>Min.</u>	<u>Minerve ou De la Sagesse</u> (Hartmann 1939)	
<u>E.D.R.</u>	<u>Eléments d'une Doctrine radicale</u> (Gallimard 1925)	
<u>C.L. I</u>	<u>Cahiers de Lorient</u> (Paris: Gallimard 1963 /Vol. I/, 1964 /Vol. II/)	
<u>C.L. II</u>		
<u>Hum.</u>	<u>Humanités</u> (PUF 1960)	
<u>Correspondance</u>	<u>Correspondance avec Elie et Florence Halévy</u> (Gallimard 1953)	
<u>Déd.M.M.-L.</u>	<u>Dédicace à Madame Morre-Lambelin</u>	

Titles of certain periodicals referred to frequently are abbreviated as follows:

<u>B.A.A.A.</u>	<u>Bulletin de l'Association des Amis d'Alain</u>
<u>R.M.M.</u>	<u>Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale</u>
<u>N.R.F.</u>	<u>Nouvelle Revue Française</u>
<u>M.F.</u>	<u>Mercur de France</u>
<u>M.L.N.</u>	<u>Modern Language Notes</u>

## PREFACE

Because Alain's thought has been much neglected and sometimes negatively viewed, his name arouses little enthusiasm in France today. Some accounts of twentieth-century French thought, obviously embarrassed by the task of classifying him, dismiss him as an influential schoolteacher, or a "widely-read journalist and sage".<sup>1</sup> While not wanting to overstress his importance, I nonetheless believe his thought deserves more recognition than it has hitherto gained. As I shall try to show, the reason for this neglect or misunderstanding lies in a failure to set his statements in their context and to see the pattern of his thinking as a whole. The fact that Alain does not correspond to the traditional image of philosopher, poet or critic has meant that those who have tried to make out a case for him as one of the above have done less than justice to the range and complexity of his thought. Henri Mondor's book on Alain, in which he presents him as a "poet" and speaks in somewhat mystifying terms of his "humour poétique latente",<sup>2</sup> gives a completely false picture of this thinker who eludes such simple classification. André Maurois, in his turn, offers the reader a mere compilation of quotations and paraphrases connected by his own sentimental effusions, and his book on Alain<sup>3</sup> has done nothing to contribute to a deeper understanding of him. At the other extreme, Georges Pascal and Olivier Reboul<sup>4</sup> make out a case for Alain as a philosopher whose works can be organised into a coherent system,

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1. R. Gibson, "First World War and literary consciousness," in French Literature and its Background, ed. J. Cruickshank, Vol. VI (1970), p. 68.

2. H. Mondor, Alain (1953), p. 189.

3. A. Maurois, Alain (1952).

4. G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970); O. Reboul, L'Homme et ses Passions d'après Alain (1968).

but by doing so they are going against the very spirit of his thought.

In the method of approach I have adopted (itself somewhat inspired by the values my experience of reading Alain has helped confirm), I have attempted not to narrow down and systematise Alain's thought but to explore it in its complexity and uniqueness, applying his own maxim of "admiration" in an attempt to maximise his strength. There may be weaknesses, in the form of inconsistencies and contradictions, in the many different writings which compose Alain's opus, but it is not my concern to point to them and systematically expose them as Alain's thought does not invite such an approach. His work can, I believe, be more profitably read by those interested in his working method and his approach to philosophical questions than by those seeking a fool-proof system of thought and definitive solutions to traditional philosophical problems. People who correspond to this latter category will derive little satisfaction from Alain's writings, which are inspired by his belief that knowledge is by nature provisional and should never be made to pose as absolute truth.

Alain's thought can perhaps best be understood within the context of the general reaction to positivism which took place in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. Positivist philosophers asserted that all knowledge must be based on observation and experimentation and they believed that certainty could be attained if the methods of science were applied in all domains. The conviction that subjective, non-analytical factors, of which the positivists took no account, must play a part in all forms of knowledge, is, however, central to Alain's way of thinking. One can see here that there is a certain affinity between Alain's thought and the anti-rationalist, but at the same time essentially scientific spirit heralded by Baudelaire and Froust. He shares their distrust of pure reason, believing that irrational



faculties are indispensable to all those in pursuit of knowledge, but at the same time does not surrender to intuitionism or any other extreme form of subjectivism. Baudelaire's belief that the imagination is essentially constructive, and synthesises factors as different as those of intuition and analysis,<sup>1</sup> dealt a blow to the extravagances of both positivism and romanticism against which many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thinkers were reacting. The fact that Alain successfully steered his way between certain polarities such as mysticism and positivism, appreciating that both analytical and non-analytical faculties must play their part in all forms of knowledge, suggests — and this is one of the main claims I shall try to substantiate — that he performed the same transformational action towards the philosophical climate of the period as artists like Baudelaire did towards the poetic spirit of the age. The belief so commonly held today, and which is generally attributed to Karl Popper, that every discovery contains an unknowable element and that there is no such thing as a logical method of having new ideas — logic being merely an instrument for systematising and formalising knowledge — was already present in Alain's writings in the early years of this century. This fact in itself shows that Alain was an intellectual pioneer in his day and that some ideas, usually attributed to more modern philosophers, could equally well be attributed to him. His own works embody an attack on the kind of philosophy that knows only deductive or inductive logic as reason and show that emotive and irrational human functions are not irrelevant to intellectual progress.

Many of Alain's attacks on philosophy and philosophers appear grossly naïve and simplistic when taken out of context, and the reading

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1. C. Baudelaire, Salon de 1859, Ouvrages Complètes (1968), p. 397.

method I have found most fruitful is to see, behind these sweeping condemnations, a kind of personal shorthand to a set of critical attitudes. For example, when Alain says, "... les philosophes, ces arrangeurs, souvent me font rire,"<sup>1</sup> and decisively mocks the "marchands d'idées"<sup>2</sup> and "marchands de vérités",<sup>3</sup> the reader should be aware that he is criticising only a certain type of philosophy which is characterised by what Alain believes to be an exaggerated use of the scientific method. The terms "abstract" and "idea", "reasoning" and "proof", even "science" and "thought", are frequently used pejoratively by Alain to point to what he considers to be a misplaced trust in reason alone. But, and this point, central as it is to the thesis, cannot be over-stressed, he is not advocating a form of irrationalism or intuitionism as some of these attacks and sweeping generalisations might at first appear to suggest. One of Alain's definitions of the word "penser" clearly shows that such an interpretation must be erroneous: "... c'est un refus de la pensée naturelle, et, profondément, un refus de la nature ..." <sup>4</sup> This declaration is but one of many which show that Alain clearly recognises the vital role which rational processes play in the organising of knowledge. We shall see in Chapter I that when he attacks a certain kind of thinker, "le polytechnicien", whose reasoning "prevents him from thinking",<sup>5</sup> he is in fact attacking reasoning only when it is taken to an isolated extreme and does not make allowance for the vital feed-back between itself and the external world.

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1. St., p. 751.

2. H.P., p. 54.

3. Ibid., p. 30.

4. Déf., p. 1078.

5. See below, p.53.

When Alain's thought is read as a whole in this way and his statements are set in their context, certain apparent contradictions and at first sight "shock" statements can be seen to be resolved. Indeed, his thinking seems to me to revolve, like that of most original thinkers dealing with the problem of expressing the unity of human experience in language which tends to suggest dualisms and categories, round an important paradox, that of achieved spontaneity where the natural is reinstated by the intelligence as an intellectual value. Alain realised the need to discipline the conflicting needs of the mind into a natural, dynamic relationship and although he often condemns a certain use which is made of reason, he does not believe that the rational principle in thought should be eliminated. An exaggerated use of this principle, which has been described by one critic as the "anti-poetic",<sup>1</sup> "the force by which single meanings tend to split up into separate isolated concepts", leads one, in Alain's opinion, to lose sight of the "lived" world which eludes any attempt at definition or conceptualisation and overflows the bounds of categories. The true task of the poet, taking the word here in the sense in which Alain frequently uses it as "l'homme pour qui le monde existe",<sup>2</sup> — and this definition is in fact one of the reasons for my choice of the title "philosophe-poète" — is that of maintaining the fluidity of existence, of capturing the living element before it is "dried up" by the rational part of mind. The belief that something can still be captured, that the "natural", living element does not fall outside the grasp of the intelligence, touches yet again on the paradox mentioned above and which is central to our subject, namely that the "natural" is an intellectual value for Alain.

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1. O. Barfield, Poetic Diction (1951), pp. 87-94.

2. S.J.L., p. 771.

As his disillusionment with a certain kind of philosophy grew, Alain turned to literature in his search for "truth" of an order different from that sought after by the kind of philosopher with whom he could not identify himself. The criterion of truth implied throughout these pages is the correspondence of any statement to experience as it is lived, not as it is known. But truth of this kind is purely subjective and can only be apprehended by demonstration in the active reading relationship; it does not reveal itself to the reader whose only concern is to explain, analyse or judge. It is Alain's belief that the creative writer who conveys the ambiguity and unpredictability of experience comes nearer to expressing "truth" than the philosopher who is intent on formalising and systematising reality, and the ordinary reader he considers better placed to apprehend the "truths" embodied in works of literature than certain literary critics who are merely putting their own theories to the test. My study culminates in a chapter on the reading experience, as I believe that it is in his understanding of the free relationship between the reader and the text that Alain is most in tune with what has proved to be the most fruitful spirit of literary criticism and art theory. Here it is that we see the force and centrality of his experience of literature and the way in which he draws insights from it which he builds into his views on philosophy, literary criticism and psychology.

In the course of my argument I have drawn on the many writings on different subjects which compose Alain's work, hoping to show their significance by comparing them, where possible, to the often more specialised works of his contemporaries and of later writers in the fields of literary criticism and language philosophy. If Alain's weaknesses as well as strengths appear in such comparisons, it has often been gratifying to me

to discover that many of his insights into the nature of the cognitive experience of literature -- for this is in fact the centre of the subject as I see it and another reason why I have used the title "philosophe-poète" -- have indeed stood the test of time. Has not Alain heralded in his own way the understanding, now reflected in many new critical directions in France in particular, that literature offers a source of "truth" differently orientated but of equal cognitive value to that of science? And is not this a reassuring focus in an age where literary studies are increasingly being ousted in favour of technological concerns? Humanist Alain may be, but, as I have tried to show, this essential humanism is by no means entirely based on the conservative values with which Alain is so often associated. He is sometimes dismissed as yet another in a long line of French "moralistes", but if he is a moralist at all it can be only in the sense of one to whom the relativity of experience itself, the richness and complexity of which is contained in literature as an "existential" act of self-renewal on the part of writer and reader, is his constant source of inspiration.

It is for these reasons that I have organised my study in a way which gradually works up, through an investigation of Alain's views on philosophy, language and literary art, to a chapter on the reading experience. In the Introduction we shall see how Alain's dissatisfaction with a certain type of philosophy was shared by many other thinkers of his day. He was not alone in learning to value poetry, and literature in general, as an alternative form of knowledge and he shared the existentialists' mistrust of thought divorced from experience. His epistemological beliefs, which culminate in the idea that the mind must allow for the vital feedback between itself and the external world, further reinforce this mistrust of abstract systems of thought; so

also, as the remainder of Chapter I will show, does his disillusionment with an educational method which sacrifices the art of thinking, an art which consists in modifying natural thought processes, to the mechanical and much easier art of reasoning. In Chapter II the crucial question of language emphasises the distance separating Alain from philosophers who use words like counters in a logical game. Alain adopts what has been termed the "poetic"<sup>1</sup> attitude to words and resolves to treat them not as mere signs pointing to some reality beyond themselves, but as entities whose potential must be fully exploited. He even shares the poet's dream of a "natural" as opposed to a "conventional" language, and many of his reflections on the subject of poetic language invite comparison with those of some modern poets and critics. Chapter III dwells on Alain's own experience as a writer and illustrates to what extent he was aware of the wealth of language which no traditional philosopher could hope to exhaust. Furthermore, the style of the "propos" shows the process of feedback between the mind and its products at work; here thinking and writing are interdependent activities and the latter does not merely record the former after the event. Indeed, in these short articles the word often takes the initiative, activating and spurring on thought itself. The next chapter shows how Alain's criteria of criticism in literary matters were formed by the greater value he attributed to "lived" as opposed to conceptualised thought. He condemns any writer who misconceives the nature of his medium and of his art by expressing pre-conceived ideas in literary form, and his belief that style is "*une manière d'exprimer que la pensée n'explique pas*"<sup>2</sup> points once more to what he believes are the inadequacies and limits of logical discourse. Indeed,

1. J.-P. Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la Littérature? (1948), p. 18.

2. A.B., p. 1013.

for Alain, literary works which offer cognitive experience in the form of subjective truths apprehended in the active reading relationship are of much greater value to man in his quest for self-knowledge than the works of psychologists or moralists whose aim is to prove or demonstrate some truth about human nature. The fifth and final chapter, entitled "Le Bonheur de Lire", suggests that, in the final analysis, Alain prefers literature to philosophy because a literary text invites the participation of the whole mind, not of the reasoning intelligence alone. The reading experience is, he believes, valuable because it can give rise to a certain beneficial feeling of wholeness and induce the state of "bonheur" experienced when man's different faculties are harmoniously integrated.

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## INTRODUCTION

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## INTRODUCTION

### ALAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF HIS TIME

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Alain is the pen-name of Emile-Auguste Chartier; he lived from 1868 until 1951. In France today he is remembered above all as a philosophy teacher; numerous are those, eminent in different fields, who claim to have been his pupils. In a letter to Henri Mondor, written before he met Alain in 1926, Valéry refers to the already influential teacher. Speaking in almost too flattering terms of Alain's "œuvre", Valéry makes a significant correction, choosing to praise instead "l'opération d'Alain":

Il y a déjà fort longtemps que je trouve étrange et absurde de ne pas connaître personnellement un homme dont l'œuvre puissante et constante est une des véritables beautés de notre temps. A la réflexion je dirais plutôt l'opération d'Alain que l'œuvre. Car je trouve, de toutes parts, des esprits façonnés par lui.<sup>1</sup>

Alain, who valued the activity of the mind over its end-products and mental experience more than intellectualized constructions, would doubtless have liked to be remembered in these terms. Indeed, it is difficult to assess him on the grounds of his written work alone, as he exercised a tremendous influence as a philosophy teacher both before and after the First World War.

Of Alain's works those best known to the general public are his collections of "propos". These are short articles covering a very wide range of topics and were originally written for newspapers or reviews. Alain started contributing to the radical paper the Dépêche de Rouen in 1903 and later he wrote for various reviews, La Nouvelle Revue Française.

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1. Henri Mondor, Alain (1953), p. 146.

L'Emancipation, Mercur de France and Marianne among others. Most of the "propos" were re-published during Alain's lifetime according to their themes as Propos de Politique, Propos sur la Religion, Propos sur l'Education and Propos de Littérature, to mention but a few of the collections. Commenting on his experience as a journalist, Alain once wrote:

J'étais poussé, et je le suis encore, par des passions politiques fort vives, et qui n'ont ni changé ni vieilli. En quoi je prétends défendre la liberté et l'égalité ... Si je n'avais pas fait du journalisme comme d'autres descendent dans la rue, je n'aurais guère été connu, ni comme professeur, ni comme écrivain.<sup>1</sup>

The "propos" once led Alain to describe himself as a "pamphleteer".<sup>2</sup> His articles, however, have little in common with the average political pamphlet: although many of them were inspired by contemporary events the reflections they contain hold good for all times. Whether he is discussing politics, philosophy or art, Alain is constantly warning against the alienation of the individual, stressing the value of the independence of thought achieved through discipline and effort. Commenting in 1972 on his "actualité", Olivier Reboul reminds us of Alain's conviction that the basic cause of man's alienation originates within each individual:

... si le libéralisme d'Emile Chartier peut paraître désuet, il nous montre pourtant que les racines de l'aliénation sont aussi en nous, dans la paresse de chacun à penser par lui-même, son impuissance par lâcheté à dominer ce qu'il y a en lui d'esprit grégaire, fataliste et fanatique, sa peur d'être soi.<sup>3</sup>

The philosopher's ideal of liberty is also that of the political thinker and the artist; it is essentially liberty to think everything anew, to seek methods rather than to have solutions imposed from above. Alain even equated a certain form of discourse, which was more an art of persuasion than an incitement to thought, with tyranny. In an article

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1. J. van Melle, "Les écrivains doivent-ils faire du journalisme?" Toute l'Edition (10 mars 1934): réponse d'Alain.

2. F. Lefèvre, Une Heure avec, 5<sup>ème</sup> série (1929), p. 215.

3. O. Reboul, B.A.A.A. (janvier 1972), p. 46.

entitled "Alain, mon professeur de liberté", one of Alain's pupils stresses his teacher's desire to break with tyrannical intellectual methods: "Un vrai poème doit 'signifier tout' sinon il ne 'signifie' que la tyrannie: telle est la leçon d'Alain et aussi la suprême leçon de notre temps."<sup>1</sup> His profession as a teacher and the experience of the "propos" were to play an important part in Alain's development. Both of these activities offered him scope to develop his own working method, to experiment with thought and to explore every aspect of experience; the "propos" led him, he once wrote, to "try out ideas".<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most decisive influence on Alain's intellectual development was the teaching of Jules Lagneau at the Lycée Michelet in Vanves. He taught Alain that there is no absolute truth,<sup>3</sup> and to him Alain owes the mistrust of systems of thought which is everywhere apparent in his writing. "Je suis assuré," Alain wrote when discussing Lagneau in his intellectual autobiography, Histoire de mes Pensées, "que toutes les vérités périraient dans le système des vérités. C'est le monde qui se tient ainsi une partie portant l'autre, ce n'est point la pensée."<sup>4</sup> Of all his contemporaries, it is perhaps true to say that Alain admired Lagneau most, not because of any startling solutions he offered to intellectual problems, but because he knew how to tackle these problems. Alain talks little of his contemporaries, and when he does it is rarely in kindly tones. He did not share the popular belief that new ideas are necessarily better than those they supersede, and the great names of the past appear more often in his pages than those in fashion at the time when he was writing. However, Alain's contemptuous attitude to all

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1. C.-H. Leconte, Preuves (1951).

2. H.P., p. 165: "J'étais amené par les Propos ... à essayer de telles idées en pente douce" (see Ch. III).

3. H.P., p. 16.

4. Ibid.

that smacked of novelty or modernism in the field of ideas<sup>1</sup> cannot mask the relevance of his thought to the intellectual mood of his day.

His collaboration with the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale during its early years situates him in the line of reaction to the "scientisme" of the second half of the nineteenth century, to the psychologists and sociologists who masqueraded as philosophers. Their attachment to what Alain believed to be an exaggerated use of the scientific method led them to attempt to explain all mental phenomena as if these belonged to the world of empirically verifiable facts. A friend and contemporary of Alain's, Élie Halévy, while still a student at the École Normale, insisted on the urgency of founding a new philosophical journal to mark the distance which separated the young generation of philosophers from their predecessors. In a letter to Xavier Léon, who was to found the R.M.M., he wrote:

Et puis je suis très impatient de voir paraître ta revue rationaliste et morale. Il est nécessaire d'agir contre le misérable positivisme dont nous sortons et l'agaçante religiosité où nous risquons de nous embourber, de fonder une philosophie de l'action et de la réflexion, d'être rationaliste avec rage.<sup>2</sup>

The Introduction to the first number of the R.M.M., which appeared in January 1893, outlines its policy of reaction to positivism and reads like a manifesto of the young philosophers of the day (Alain was twenty-five years old at the time). In it, considerable stress was laid on the need to concentrate on specifically metaphysical problems, problems outside the range of science, and to limit the domain of philosophy, which had been tending to merge with other disciplines and to overlap into the field of the experimental sciences. The "gods of the day" during Alain's student years were Sainte-Beuve, Renan and Taine, whom he termed

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1. H.P., p. 75: "Chacun veut devancer les autres et inventer tout à neuf. Et le neuf est bien misérable."

2. Correspondance, p. 380.

the "trois mauvais maîtres",<sup>1</sup> as he believed that they followed the methods of the experimental sciences too closely in the psychological domain. Taine's method he compared to that of an anatomist and is reported to have said in one of his classes, "Dans Taine tous les actes de pensée sont traités comme des osselets."<sup>2</sup> The stated aim of the R.M.M. was to restrict itself to the consideration of theories of knowledge and action:

Dans un cadre plus restreint, on voudrait donner plus de relief aux doctrines de philosophie proprement dites; on voudrait, laissant de côté les sciences spéciales plus ou moins voisines de la philosophie, ramener l'attention publique aux théories générales de la pensée et de l'action, dont elle s'est détournée depuis un certain temps et qui cependant ont toujours été, sous le nom aujourd'hui décrié de métaphysique, la seule source des croyances rationnelles ...<sup>3</sup>

In an article entitled "Introduction à la Métaphysique" and published in the R.M.M. in 1903, Bergson talks of the partial eclipse of metaphysics, a branch of knowledge which, he believed, should put intuition before analysis, during the last half-century. For this he blamed the analytical mood prevailing in philosophical circles which were thoroughly imbued with positivism. "L'intuition métaphysique," he claims, "quoiqu'on n'y puisse arriver qu'à force de connaissances matérielles, est tout autre chose que le résumé ou la synthèse de ces connaissances."<sup>4</sup> Bergson's notion of possible philosophical knowledge independent of science suggests the relevance of metaphysics, in the Bergsonian sense, to Alain's idea of "poetic" knowledge.

Although he contributed to the R.M.M. until 1907, Alain's intellectual development was to follow a different course from that of Xavier Léon, Elie Halévy or Léon Brunschvicg with whom the Journal remained

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1. H.P., p. 26.

2. Cours de 1911-12 (quoted by A. Rorat in "Souvenirs", B.A.A.A. 36, p. 49).

3. R.M.M. (janvier 1893), p.2.

4. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 255.

closely identified. Looking back on this period, Maurice Savin points to Alain's growing disillusionment with the R.M.M. and with the ideals represented by his generation:

C'était une revue jeune, comme nous dirions. Pour Alain la revue de ses camarades et de sa génération. Au fur et à mesure il a découvert que ce n'était pas sa revue, qu'il était et qu'il n'était pas de sa génération.<sup>1</sup>

Alain's attitude to Brunschvicg serves to illustrate one of the differences between himself and his generation: he grew increasingly hostile to the extreme idealism and narrow rationalism which the latter defended. As early as 1893 he wrote to Elie Halévy, "... Brunschvicg (Oh!!) ne peut pas être l'âme d'une revue; il est trop 'res cogitans', pas assez 'voluntas cogitandi'."<sup>2</sup> We learn in Histoire de mes Pensées that the "propos" written before the '14-'18 war contain the germs of what Alain calls "une philosophie de l'existence"<sup>3</sup> and that he was turning his back on a certain form of idealism. Georges Pascal, in his book on Alain, distinguishes between two forms of idealism, "... dont l'une, que l'on pourrait appeler ontologique, réduit l'existence du monde à de pures idées, tandis que l'autre se contente d'affirmer que le monde n'est saisi qu'à travers les idées."<sup>4</sup> It is the first kind, epitomized in the idealism of Berkeley, to which Alain was opposed. The rift between Alain and Brunschvicg is clearly illustrated by Brunschvicg's refusal to accept the conclusions of the Entretiens au Bord de la Mer: Alain was moving here towards what could be called an existentialist position (in that he

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1. M. Savin, C.L. I (1963), p. x: Avertissement.

2. Correspondance, p. 42.

3. H.P., p. 78.

4. G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970), p. 74.

refused to recognise the reality of purely mental constructions), but Brunschvicg felt that the work contained a contradiction.<sup>1</sup>

The thought of Alain and his contemporaries was, however, just part of a wide reaction taking place at the end of the nineteenth century against positivism and the application of the scientific method in all domains. Bergson was undoubtedly the central figure. He believed that philosophers who understand the true nature of metaphysical inquiry should not take concepts as their starting point, but should work from reality towards them. The following lines illustrate his conception of metaphysics:

S'il existe un moyen de posséder une réalité absolument au lieu de la connaître relativement, de se placer en elle au lieu d'adopter des points de vue sur elle, d'en avoir l'intuition au lieu de faire l'analyse, enfin de la saisir en dehors de toute traduction ou représentation symbolique, la métaphysique est cela même.<sup>2</sup>

Alain's conception of metaphysics, a science which, by definition, is concerned with questions of ultimate being beyond the objectively knowable world, appears strikingly similar to Bergson's when we consider his dislike of the methods employed by certain philosophers who tried to make of metaphysics an object of scientific study. Alain's attitude to Bergson and his disciples was however coloured to a considerable degree by his own anti-clericalism. He certainly preferred Bergson's doctrine to the rigid psychological determinism out of which it had arisen, but of his disciples he writes condescendingly:

Le fait est qu'ils avaient raison, mais contre une mécanique ridicule et contre une conception de l'intelligence dont l'aine peut donner un exemple. Et quand ils avaient réfuté ce non-être, ils croyaient avoir dit quelque chose.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Journal, 1e 29 août 1938 (not published): "Il [Alain] essaya un jour de faire admettre à Brunschvicg que les Entretiens étaient quelque chose. Brunschvicg répondit: 'Non il y a une contradiction'" (p. 6).
  2. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 206.
  3. H.P., p. 63.



The following lines make explicit the exact reasons for Alain's reticence:

Au fond je les voyais très bien arriver ayant dans leur sac le catholicisme, la tyrannie, et la guerre ensemble. Simplement!<sup>1</sup>

However vehement his attacks on the "Bergsonians", Alain is more reserved in his judgement as far as Bergson is concerned, calling him, on more than one occasion, "un homme de nuances et de ressources".<sup>2</sup> He could condone neither the religious premises of his doctrine, nor his conception of inner life. There are, however, some striking parallels between Bergson's conception of philosophical thinking and Alain's. Aware of the inability of conceptualized thought to convey the unity of world and mind in immediate experience,<sup>3</sup> Bergson rated the faculty of intuition above that of intelligence, judging it more capable of apprehending lived meaning. Intuition is not a simple, primary faculty as a cursory reading of his works may suggest, but, it has been claimed, can be compared to Gabriel Marcel's "secondary reflection" which restores the unity which has been shattered by the conceptual, discursive reflection.<sup>4</sup> "L'intuition," Bergson writes in La Pensée et le Mouvant, "nous donne la chose dont l'intelligence ne saisit que la transposition spatiale, la traduction métaphorique;"<sup>5</sup> it is therefore a "super-intellectual faculty": "Elle représente l'attention que l'esprit se prête à lui-même, par surcroît,

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1. H.P., p. 63.

2. P.M., p. 1195.

3. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 34: "Nombreux sont les philosophes qui ont senti l'impuissance de la pensée conceptuelle à atteindre le fond de l'esprit, nombreux par conséquent ceux qui ont parlé d'une faculté supra-intellectuelle d'intuition."

4. I.W. Alexander, Bergson (1957), p. 55. Bergson's intuition is interpreted here as the terminal point of a dialectic. According to Bergson the three stages in the cognitive process are instinct, intelligence, and intuition, and according to Gabriel Marcel they are immediacy, primary and secondary reflection.

5. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 89.



tandis qu'il se fixe sur la matière, son objet,"<sup>1</sup> and is of more value to the metaphysician than the intelligence alone. As a result of this conviction, Bergson chose to express his thought in the images revealed to him by intuition, his figurative style being the reflection of the form in which his thought first materialized in his own mind, and as such inseparable from his philosophy. Bergson himself distinguished between two types of image: those which he used to expose his thought to others and those which helped him to grasp it more accurately himself; the latter he describes as "l'image voisine de l'intuition dont le philosophe peut avoir besoin pour lui-même ..." <sup>2</sup> Although Alain's ideas on the subject of metaphor and image are very different from Bergson's—he never consciously uses images to expose his thought—we find in the "propos" the same concern to describe the activity of mind over and above its end-products and the authenticity of existence prior to conceptualization. The reader of the "propos" is in the presence of lived thought, and here, more obviously than in his longer works, the way in which Alain expresses himself reflects his conception of mental activity which always eludes systematisation and classification.<sup>3</sup> Bergson's conception of philosophical thinking has been interpreted as being

... the reflection upon what is revealed in concrete experience, that is the experience of an acting, existing subject prior to its predicative formulation. To describe, clarify and elucidate what is revealed therein is its prime task. At this ante-predicative level knowledge and existence are one; for truth is first lived before it is formulated in conceptual terms.<sup>4</sup>

This aspect of Bergson's thought is one of the sources common to the different philosophical trends of the century. By stressing the fact

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1. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 98.

2. Ibid., p. 211.

3. See below, p. 133.

4. I.W. Alexander, Bergson (1957), p. 101.

that "lived" as opposed to conceptualized meaning is of epistemological value to the philosopher, he was anticipating phenomenology and existentialism.

If a consideration of the common ground between Bergson and Alain helps to situate the latter in the context of his generation, the attitude of Gabriel Marcel, whose originality lies in his break with "official" philosophy and his application of the phenomenological method, to Alain is particularly illuminating. Gabriel Marcel reviewed at the time of their publication, in 1927 and 1936 respectively, Les Idées et les Ages and Histoire de mes Pensées,<sup>1</sup> and in spite of the distance separating his Christian beliefs from what he calls Alain's "aggressive humanism" there was much in these two books which appealed to him. This change occurs when he is talking of Alain's confidence in man's self-sufficiency without God:

Evocuez au hasard Novalis ou Kierkegaard, ou Nietzsche ou même Bergson ... et vous réaliserez du coup tout ce qui manque à une philosophie qui, par moments, je l'accorde, parvient cependant à nous donner un sentiment de plénitude et comme de suffisance à soi-même. ... Une pensée qui prétend se contenter tout à fait elle-même débouche sans doute inévitablement dans l'imposture — et cela d'autant plus sûrement, d'autant plus rapidement, qu'elle sera plus agressivement humaniste.<sup>2</sup>

Les Idées et les Ages he nevertheless describes as "un très grand livre",<sup>3</sup> and "un livre inépuisable".<sup>4</sup> Illustrating Alain's claim that "il n'y a point du tout de connaissance hors de l'expérience, ni d'idées sans objet actuellement présent",<sup>5</sup> he quotes a significant passage from Les Idées et les Ages in which one can find many parallels to his own thought:

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1. L'Europe Nouvelle 19/xi/1927, pp. 1532-1534, and 7/xi/1936, pp. 1119-20.
  2. Ibid. 7/xi/1936, p. 1120.
  3. Ibid. 19/xi/1927, p. 1532.
  4. Ibid.
  5. Ibid.

Il y a disproportion et même ridicule disproportion entre cette immense et impérieuse présence (du monde) dans laquelle nous sommes pris et engagés, et les légers discours par lesquels nous essayons d'en rendre compte. Et c'est parce que nous sommes assurés premièrement du monde que le philosophe fait rire.<sup>1</sup>

Although not in agreement with every aspect of Alain's thought, particularly as he considers that the latter "exalts man at the world's expense",<sup>2</sup> the fact that he refrains from refuting Alain's ideas systematically suggests that Gabriel Marcel shares his fundamental mistrust of what he calls, in words which could be Alain's, "l' inanité de ces ergotages dialectiques".<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Marcel's claim that he is not alone in his reaction to "official philosophy", and his assertion that no philosophical work from which "la morsure du réel"<sup>4</sup> is absent is worthy of the name, suggests that Alain's conception of philosophical thinking was very widely held at the time when he was writing. Although Alain's disillusionment with a certain kind of philosophy and his questioning of the status of philosophical theories was shared by many of his contemporaries, his attempt to revolutionise philosophical thinking at its roots by proclaiming that language, even for the philosopher, should have more than an informative role, must surely have been an isolated one among thinkers of the day. While bearing in mind the inevitable overlaps between Alain's thought and that of his contemporaries, it is above all this latter point that I intend to stress in an attempt to show the aspects of his thought which are most original.

Alain's hostility to abstract philosophical systems is everywhere apparent in his writings but behind this hostility there lies not a mere prejudicial whim but a metaphysical conviction. He deemed philosophy to

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1. L'Europe Nouvelle 19/xi/1927, p. 1532.

2. Ibid., p. 1533.

3. G. Marcel, Essai de Philosophie Concrète (1940), p. 52.

4. Ibid., p. 101.

be capable of higher things than the mere assembling of ideas into a coherent system. As early as 1895 he wrote to Elie Halévy, "Je ne sais pas si j'écrirai des livres, mais j'espère que je ne serai jamais l'inventeur d'un système."<sup>1</sup> His break with professional philosophers arose not only out of certain ideological differences, but also because of his conception of what philosophical thinking should be. His scorn for the methods of what he called the "philosophie d'institut" he inherited from Jules Lagneau, whose motto, "clarum per obscurius",<sup>2</sup> was to have a lasting effect on Alain. Discussing Lagneau's method, Alain wrote: "Il y a certainement une clarté qui laisse stupide, et le jugement meurt devant la preuve."<sup>3</sup> Whereas the "philosophie d'institut" transforms metaphysics into an object of study whose end result is no longer metaphysical<sup>4</sup> but scientific, Lagneau kept all discussion on a metaphysical level, applying no a priori theories but trying to render the text in question more itself rather than to explain it in scientific terms. Gérard Granel has described Lagneau's method as one of "épaississant l'obscurité métaphysique en elle-même et pour elle-même, ne cherchant que là une possible clarté".<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging his debt to his teacher Lagneau, Alain says he has learnt to fear "excessive clarity" and gives the following account of what he believes should be the true philosopher's method:

Non pas isolant les idées et les produisant dans l'abstraction, comme s'il se détournait du spectacle des choses, mais au contraire revenant de ces abstractions faciles, allant toujours du clair à l'obscur, épaississant le nuage jusqu'à lui donner la consistance des choses.<sup>5</sup>

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1. Correspondance, p. 69.

2. H.P., p. 177: "Lagneau m'avait rendu vénérable son 'clarum per obscurius'; aussi en un certain sens je dédaignais d'être clair."

3. S.J.L., p. 776.

4. G. Granel, Traditionis traditio (1972), "Lagneau, Alain, Alexandre" (first published in Critique Nos. 183-4 under the title "Michel Alexandre et l'école française de la perception").

5. S.J.L., pp. 746-7.

His mistrust of clarity coloured Alain's attitude to certain of his contemporaries. Criticising Poincaré he writes:

Son livre est un mauvais livre de toutes les façons; par le ton tranchant qu'il prend; par l'exiguité des moyens et une sorte d'essoufflement continu et de maigreur; mauvais aussi parce qu'il va encourager les bavards, et les apologistes pressés. Mauvais surtout parce qu'il encouragera les niais à croire que réellement la philosophie n'est pas difficile, alors que ce sont réellement nos philosophes qui, réellement, ne sont pas difficiles."<sup>1</sup>

Alain's confession in his Journal that he had always preferred literature to philosophy, which was "much easier",<sup>2</sup> suggests that the superiority of literature in his mind was due to its metaphysical nature and to the fact that, unlike the "philosophie d'institut", it was not divorced from its essence. The following passage favourably compares the metaphysical obscurity which Alain values to what he believes is the empty transparency of "premature clarity":

On explique toujours trop tôt, et on perd alors quelque chose qui est infiniment plus précieux que tout résultat, c'est l'élan et la foi. Car une certaine obscurité qui nous touche, qui nous est parente, promet absolument, et par ce que nous nommons beauté, des pensées dont nous pourrions jurer; au lieu que la clarté prématurée rend presque stupide, par le sentiment que nous avons alors de ne point penser avec nous-mêmes ...<sup>3</sup>

When Alain writes that Lagneau "était toujours en pleine métaphysique",<sup>4</sup> he is referring to this method which consists in maintaining metaphysical obscurity rather than explaining away difficulties. On one occasion, when discussing his revered teacher, he compares the metaphysician to the poet: "Lagneau était une sorte de poète," he writes, and adds, "... Voilà ce que c'est qu'un métaphysicien."<sup>5</sup> This declaration assumes

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1. CL, I, p. 182.

2. Journal 1939 (not published), p. 141: "La chose littéraire m'intéresse beaucoup. Il en fut toujours ainsi, même à l'École Normale je me plaisais à faire des travaux de littérature. ... La philosophie m'intéressait beaucoup moins, c'est tellement plus facile."

3. H.P., p. 178.

4. Portraits de Famille (1961), p. 73.

5. Ibid., p. 82.

significance when seen in relation to Alain's conception of metaphysics revealed in the same work: "Selon moi la métaphysique est un éclair de l'Esprit sur la Nature, qui suppose une inspiration poétique."<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of this "poetic inspiration" as the activity of mind which accompanies perception<sup>2</sup> points to the close connection in Alain's mind between poetry and perception. As we shall see in Chapter I, he considers that certain moments of intuitive insight experienced by the poetic mind while it is engaged in perceiving external reality approach nearer to metaphysical knowledge than the "vain ideas" of the reasoning mind ever can. The temptation is strong to compare the distinction made above between metaphysical obscurity and scientific clarity to Bergson's distinction between absolute and relative knowledge, the first attained through intuition and the second through analysis. Analysis, as Bergson sees it, is a method diametrically opposed to that of Lagneau and Alain: "Analyser consiste donc à exprimer une chose en fonction de ce qui n'est pas elle."<sup>3</sup> Metaphysics, then, when it transcends rigid concepts and captures the immediacy of experience without translating it into symbolic language, is an activity akin to poetry. Mikel Dufrenne, a phenomenologist and pupil of Alain's, when clarifying his own use of the term "métaphysique", calls it "the poetry of thought": "Elle, la métaphysique, est à la pensée conceptuelle ce que la pratique artistique est à la pratique utilitaire; tant qu'elle ne se dogmatise pas, elle est la poésie de la pensée."<sup>4</sup> This, I think, comes very close to Alain's own conception of what metaphysics should be.

According to one critic, it was Sartre's popularising of the ideas

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1. Portraits de Famille (1961), p. 74.

2. Interpretation suggested by G. Pascal in L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970), p. 114.

3. H. Bergson, La Pensée et le Mouvant (1934), p. 205.

4. M. Dufrenne, Art et Politique (1974), p. 188.

of Husserl and Heidegger which prevented Alain's thought from gaining the recognition it deserved. He witheringly described Sartre returning from Berlin as "l'homme qui revient de Pontoise et qui a fait ses emplettes".<sup>1</sup> Of the philosophical scene in post-war France he writes, deploring the cloud cast over Lagneau and Alain:

... ce néant a pesé de tout son être sur les dix premières années d'après-guerre. C'était lui tout le décor, l'estrade et le spectacle de la philosophie en France, suffisamment brillant, olinquant et pesant pour faire figure d'époque et reléguer dans les ténèbres non seulement Brunschvicg avec Bergson, ce dont à vrai dire nous nous consolerions assez bien, mais aussi Lagneau avec Alain ...<sup>2</sup>

It was, I think, not because he had any strikingly original ideas that Sartre was to dominate the philosophical scene in France, but because the negative aspects of his philosophy, the fact, above all, that he preached the necessity of human conflict, found a favourable climate in a country emerging from a war which had seen a decline in humanist values. Indeed, Sartre's major theme which earned for his philosophy the label of existentialism, that "existence precedes essence"<sup>3</sup> and that "le monde des explications et des raisons n'est pas celui de l'existence",<sup>4</sup> had found expression in preceding centuries and can be traced back through Rousseau to Montaigne. In fact, in the twentieth century itself Sartre had a predecessor in Alain ~~himself~~, who wrote in a "propos" in 1908, "Exister c'est quelque chose; cela écrase toutes les raisons. ... aucune raison ne peut donner l'existence, aucune existence ne peut donner ses raisons."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the epistemological foundations of Sartre's philosophy were also present in Alain, although they too can be traced back even further. One critic writes, casting doubts over Sartre's

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1. G. Granel, Traditionis traditio (1972), p. 20.

2. Ibid., p. 26.

3. J.-P. Sartre, L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme (1946), p. 17.

4. J.-P. Sartre, La Nausée (1938), p. 169.

5. Propos I, p. 33.



originality in this field:

L'idée que la conscience a une structure intentionnelle, qu'elle est toujours conscience de quelque chose, et l'idée que la conscience est "pour-soi", que toute conscience de quelque chose est conscience de soi, M. Sartre aurait pu les trouver chez Alain.<sup>1</sup>

The differences between Sartre and Alain are, however, not far to seek.

Whereas the contingency of existence is interpreted in a negative sense by Sartre, for Alain it is the source of hope and effort.<sup>2</sup> The mood of optimism which pervades Alain's writings is not, as it might first appear, the reflection of a naturally cheerful temperament; it is, on the contrary, the outcome of his resolution to triumph over the pessimism which he readily admits is more natural to man. "Pessimisme," we read in

Définitions, "est naturel et abonde en preuves puisque nul n'est jamais à l'abri du chagrin, de la douleur, de la maladie ou de la mort ... Le fond du pessimisme est de ne pas croire à la volonté. L'optimisme est tout volontaire."<sup>3</sup> If the term existentialism can be applied to philosophies as different as those of Sartre, Alain and Gabriel Marcel, it is because it points to the revolution in philosophical thinking which posed the world of "lived" as opposed to conceptualized meaning as the field of philosophical inquiry.<sup>4</sup> In 1949 one philosopher wrote:

Il n'y a plus aujourd'hui de systèmes philosophiques. Le mouvement qu'on nomme existentialisme ne signifie peut-être pas autre chose que cette impossibilité de dépasser l'existant que nous sommes pour englober l'univers.<sup>5</sup>

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1. G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970), p. 86.

2. Of this aspect of Alain's thought, J. Hyppolite wrote: "... ce caractère neuf et foncièrement imprévisible de l'existence est le point d'appui de l'espoir humain" ("L'existence, l'imaginaire et la valeur chez Alain," M.F. 1/x/1949, p. 224).

3. Déf., p. 1078.

4. When Alain's Entretiens au Bord de la Mer was re-edited in 1949, it appeared on bookstalls bound with the publicity slogan "Enfin l'Existentialisme" (G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain, p. 99).

5. J. Hyppolite, "L'existence, l'imaginaire et la valeur ...", p. 224.



Gabriel Marcel speaks in similar terms of the absurd pretensions of some philosophers "à encapsuler l'univers dans un ensemble de formules plus ou moins rigoureusement enchaînées".<sup>1</sup> The following pages will, I hope, show that Alain played a more central role in this revolution in philosophical thinking than a glance at the average account of twentieth-century French thought might suggest.

As Alain's disillusionment with "official" philosophy, and with the "ergotages" of logical discourse, grew, he turned, perhaps somewhat unusually, to literature, myths, legends and fairy tales for truths of a different order, proclaiming that "il y a du vrai dans tous les contes, et du faux dans toutes les doctrines".<sup>2</sup> It was Sir James Frazer's Golden Bough which gave rise to the foregoing comment and to a criticism of one of the errors of the rationalist tendency of the day: "Une des erreurs communes en notre temps, c'est de vouloir que les idées soient vraies."<sup>3</sup> The importance Alain attributed to mythical, metaphorical or pre-rational thinking suggests that, before thinkers like Lévi-Strauss, he was aware of the value of anthropological sources for the philosopher. Some of the analyses in La Pensée Sauvage are reminiscent of certain of Alain's texts. In a chapter entitled "La Science du Concret", Lévi-Strauss claims that magic and science should not be set in opposition to each other but seen as two parallel forms of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

In 1950 Alain's originality in the importance he accorded to myths and his divergence from a certain philosophical tradition was already receiving comment. "Alain entend se libérer de la tradition philosophique qui confond le vrai et le rationnel avec le vraisemblable,"<sup>5</sup> we

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1. G. Marcel, Essai de Philosophie Concrète (1940), p. 95.

2. Propos I, p. 333, "La magie naturelle".

3. Ibid.

4. C. Lévi-Strauss, La Pensée Sauvage (1962), p. 21.

5. R. Mehl, "La situation de la philosophie religieuse en France" in Marvin Farber (ed.), L'Activité Philosophique Contemporaine (1950), p. 269.

read in an article rather ironically entitled "La situation de la philosophie religieuse en France". To illustrate this aspect of Alain's thought the author of the article quotes the following from Les Dieux: "Nous sommes fort mal placés pour douter d'un récit ...,"<sup>1</sup> and "Ces traces de l'homme ... ne disent jamais autre chose que le vrai de l'homme."<sup>2</sup> More important than Alain's actual interpretation of religious myths (which, as M. Mehl rightly points out, lacks inspiration, myths being for Alain the expression of fundamental childhood experiences) is the fact that he takes myths seriously, an attitude which is quoted as having had "d'heureux prolongements". The following lines point to the value of myths for those who favour "lived" as opposed to conceptualized meaning:

La confusion entre mythe et irrationnalité, voire puérilité se dissipe. Le caractère existentiel du mythe et de la religion qui le véhicule sont mis en évidence. Le mythe, qui suppose une alliance profonde de l'acte et de la pensée, exprime, avant toute dissociation intellectuelle, certaines relations profondes de l'être humain avec le cosmos.<sup>3</sup>

Mikel Dufrenne, writing on "Mentalité primitive et Heidegger", makes frequent reference to Alain's relentless attempts to "faire droit aux religions",<sup>4</sup> and his claim that metaphors must be taken seriously sounds like an echo from Les Dieux when Alain asserts his intention: "on comprend peut-être comment je prendrai les métaphores, c'est-à-dire très au sérieux."<sup>5</sup> The fact that Mikel Dufrenne, a former pupil of Alain's,<sup>6</sup>

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1. D., p. 1209.

2. Ibid., p. 1211.

3. Op. cit., p. 269. G. Gusdorf, in Mythe et Métaphysique (1953), also refers to this aspect of Alain's thought (p. 162): "... le mythe n'est plus considéré comme aberration pure, mais devient, en tant que chiffre de l'homme, révélateur d'une certaine sagesse, qu'Alain découvre dans l'Evangile comme dans Platon."

4. M. Dufrenne, Les Etudes Philosophiques (1954), pp. 284-306.

5. D., p. 1253.

6. In the foreword to Jalons (1966), p. 1, Mikel Dufrenne acknowledges his debt to Alain: "Il y a pourtant une dette considérable qui n'est pas reconnue dans ce volume: celle que j'ai contractée à l'égard d'Alain, / ...

often turns to Alain's texts to illustrate points in his phenomenological analyses, shows the relevance to modern philosophy of this particular aspect of Alain's thought. In his Phénoménologie de l'Expérience Esthétique, for example, when discussing the duality of meaning in the aesthetic object, he cites the biblical parable as an example of metaphorical language. Here, besides the literal meaning, there exists "un autre sens qui lui est intérieur, et qui se découvre précisément lorsque nous renonçons à prendre nos distances, à expliquer, à juger."<sup>1</sup> And a reference to Alain follows these lines which are already reminiscent of him:

Que l'on songe pareillement à ce qu'Alain appelle le vrai des contes; on l'atteint, au delà de l'histoire littérale, quand on renonce à disputer, à réfuter ou à railler, et d'avantage quand on renonce à expliquer, par exemple par des raisons physiologiques ou sociologiques, le contenu littéral. Non que l'explication soit interdite, mais le sens véritable lui échappe.<sup>2</sup>

When Alain praises the myth as a source of truth, he is not denying a distinction between the true and the false as some of his remarks might at first appear to suggest. He considers that myths can be of value as a source of knowledge, but only through critical reaction which can make objective truth of the subjective truths embodied in them.<sup>3</sup> The words quoted above also point to Alain's break with traditional methods of scientific explanation, the full consequences of which will be seen when his ideas on literary criticism come under discussion.

Alain turned not only to myths and legends in his search for a more

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d'Alain, dont je fus l'élève et dont je suis toujours le lecteur. La vogue qu'Alain connaît aujourd'hui chez les amateurs ne doit pas induire les professionnels à oublier tant d'admirables analyses. Alain ne voulait pas que la philosophie se réduisît à une technique, ou s'employât à découvrir une technologie — seuls les technocrates de la philosophie peuvent s'en irriter."

1. M. Dufrenne, Phénoménologie de l'Expérience Esthétique I (1967), p. 398.

2. Ibid.

3. See below, p. 76.

authentic field of inquiry, but also, and particularly after his discovery of Valéry and Mallarmé, to poetry. On becoming acquainted with their verse, Alain became aware of the capacity of poetry to be its own revelation and not the representation of some absent, abstract truth, and he was able in consequence to identify a certain kind of poetry with his own attempt to maintain metaphysical obscurity and avoid the representational language of the "philosophie d'institut". When, defending Valéry from charges of hermeticism, he claims, "Je crois que l'obscurité que certains trouvent en lui, vient de ce qu'il a rassemblé de nouveau la poésie et la philosophie,"<sup>1</sup> he is pointing to the metaphysical nature of both these activities if they are properly conducted. Alain was aware that Valéry's poetry was not obscure in the negative sense but that much of its meaningfulness and expressive ambiguity was the result of Valéry's belief that clarity kills off poetic meaning. We have already seen how Alain considers that obscurity can be valuable for the philosopher also because clarity does not account for much of what is meaningful in immediate experience.<sup>2</sup> It would seem, then, that Alain appreciated poetry, particularly that of Mallarmé and Valéry, as it reveals a face of reality rarely captured by those who use language in a conventional way and pride themselves on clarity. In an attempt to account for the relevance of poetry to the philosopher, Mikel Dufrenne writes:

... Et l'on comprend que la philosophie, lorsqu'elle renonce, non pas à la vérité, mais à l'idée d'une vérité dogmatiquement énonçable, et qu'elle identifie la vérité au mouvement de la révélation plutôt qu'à son contenu, se tourne vers la poésie;<sup>3</sup>

In Alain's own philosophy there is no trace of "truths dogmatically pronounced", and the subsequent pages will, I hope, show that "truth" for

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1. F. Lefèvre, Une Heure Avec, 5e série (1929), p. 205.

2. See above, p. 13.

3. M. Dufrenne, La Notion d'a priori (1959), p. 284.

Alain is only to be found in obscure, "poetic" form which appeals both to the intellect and the sensibility.

Alain was not alone among philosophers in looking to poetry as an alternative form of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Whitehead, who is reported to have said that "always in the poetry itself is a fragrance of experience which the poet alone has been able to capture",<sup>2</sup> found that the works of Wordsworth and Shelley conveyed much that was inexpressible in the language of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In Germany, Heidegger quotes Rilke and Hölderlin when, according to one commentator, "il veut nous faire sentir notre parenté avec le monde, l'Être-dans-le-monde, antérieur, d'après lui, au Cogito cartésien".<sup>4</sup> Hölderlin's poetry teaches Heidegger more about the "foundation of being" than any abstract generalisation ever can. In an article entitled "Hölderlin and the essence of poetry", he points to poetry as being the most essence-revealing of all human activities:

... parce que l'être et l'essence des choses ne peuvent jamais résulter d'un calcul ni être dérivées de l'existant déjà donné, il faut qu'ils soient librement créés, posés et donnés.<sup>5</sup>

Bergson was another philosopher who felt the inadequacy of conceptual language; however, it was not to poetry but to the art of the novelist that he turned in his search for the embodiment of subjective truths.

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1. The idea that poetry is a form of knowledge that complements philosophy is summed up by Mikel Dufrenne in the following lines: "L'histoire de la pensée atteste en effet une solidarité étroite entre philosophie et poésie, comme si la philosophie lorsqu'elle prétend être une pensée de l'impensable, ayant peine à se suffire à elle-même, éprouvait le besoin d'être relayée ou relancée par un savoir qui n'est plus philosophique, par un discours qui se situe peut-être au delà du savoir" (*La Notion d'a priori*, p. 285).
  2. *Dialogues of A.N. Whitehead* (1955), ed. Lucien Price, p. 195.
  3. J. Wahl, *Poésie, Pensée, Perception* (1947), p. 24. Whitehead is quoted here as having appreciated in Wordsworth the feeling of "immutability" conveyed by certain aspects of nature, and in Shelley, that of "universal fluidity".
  4. *Ibid.* Wahl adds, pointing to what he believes to be the link between poetry and philosophy: "La parenté de la poésie et de la philosophie se révèle quand toutes deux nous révèlent notre parenté avec le monde."
  5. M. Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la Métaphysique?* (1951), p. 244.

In the following passage Bergson goes so far as to suggest that the novelist is better equipped than the philosopher to expand consciousness and accede to "le moi profond":

Que si maintenant quelque romancier hardi, déchirant la toile habilement tissée de notre moi conventionnel, nous montre sous cette logique apparente une absurdité fondamentale, sous cette juxtaposition d'états simples une pénétration infinie de mille impressions diverses qui ont déjà cessé d'être au moment où on les nomme, nous le louons de nous avoir mieux connus que nous ne nous connaissions nous-mêmes.<sup>1</sup>

The expression here of the philosopher's dissatisfaction with his own medium, and his indirect appeal to a novelist to realise in his art some of his own most deeply felt intuitions, again points to literature as a form of knowledge that can supplement philosophy. The name of Proust has often been associated with that of Bergson, and some critics have gone so far as to see in Proust's novel the application of Bergson's doctrine of lived time. They believe that Proust's use of such an expression as "la durée en moi de ce nom" reflects Bergson's influence,<sup>2</sup> but this Proust denies.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the fact that Proust's use of the word "durée" is very different from Bergson's is evidence that he was not simply putting Bergsonian theories into practice in art but exploring the continuity of consciousness through the medium of the novel, and relying on the creative intelligence where Bergson relies on revelation. Indeed, far from considering A la Recherche du Temps Perdu as the mere application of some aspects of Bergson's philosophy, one could say that Bergson leads to Proust or to a certain kind of art as the embodiment of a subjective truth, a truth that can only be apprehended by demonstration during the experience of reading. Elsewhere Bergson speaks in more

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1. H. Bergson, Essai sur les Données Immédiates de la Conscience (1913), p. 101.

2. F. Delattre, "Bergson et Proust," Etudes Bergsoniennes I (1948), p. 44.

3. Ibid., p. 62.

general terms of the value of <sup>works of</sup> literature for the philosopher: "... ne lui montrent-elles pas souvent la voie où, avec d'autres moyens et pour atteindre des résultats différents, plus complets, il doit s'engager?"<sup>1</sup> For Alain too one of the main virtues of literary works is that they complement the fragmentary nature of thought and enable the reader to experience subjective truths of a universal nature.

A philosopher by profession, and converted to literature relatively late in life,<sup>2</sup> Alain was not alone in his generation in pointing to the potential superiority of literature over philosophy as a form of knowledge. However, he went further than most of his contemporaries in probing the specific nature of the mental activities involved in the creation and appreciation of works of literature. The way in which he does this will be examined in the following chapters.

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1. L. Adolphe, La Dialectique des Images chez Bergson (1951), p. 212. (Quoted from "Une visite à Bergson," Labyrinthe 13/x/1945.)
  2. Propos I, p. 500.

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C H A P T E R      I

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## CHAPTER I

### ALAIN'S IDEA OF PHILOSOPHY ("LE BONHEUR DE PENSER")

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#### 1. Perception and Poetry

Many of Alain's critics, in their attempts to classify him within certain strict schools of thought, are doing him an injustice. Although his works may furnish material which favour an existentialist, phenomenologist or intellectualist interpretation, to attempt to classify his thought is to misunderstand his intentions. M. Merleau-Ponty quotes Alain as being representative of the intellectualist attitude,<sup>1</sup> but although some passages in his writings favour this interpretation, there is nothing more foreign to his thought than the narrow intellectualism which some see as characterising it. A glance at one particular definition of intellectualism will show just how misleading such an interpretation is, if applied to a philosopher who values "metaphysical obscurity".<sup>2</sup>

L'intellectualisme constitue dans son essence un essai pour éliminer de la pensée l'élément matériel, antérieur au "cogito" et que le "cogito" ne parvient pas à élucider. Cette opacité initiale, qui tient à la fois à l'objet, au réel et à la nature de l'homme, remonte jusqu'à l'alliance fondamentale de l'homme et du monde, qui fait l'être dans le monde.<sup>3</sup>

Alain himself would no doubt consider the question whether or not his thought was intellectualist a worthy subject of debate for the "philosophie

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1. M. Merleau-Ponty, La Phénoménologie de la Perception (1945), pp. 42-43.

2. See above, p. 13.

3. G. Gusdorf, Mythe et Métaphysique (1953), p. 195.

d'institut" whose methods he so much despised.<sup>1</sup> In Histoire de mes Pensées he declares that he has no desire to construct a philosophical system and this declaration should be sufficient warning to those tempted to interpret his thought according to the various schools: "Je n'ai jamais cru pour ma part qu'il fût possible de trouver une philosophie nouvelle, et j'avais assez de retrouver ce que les meilleurs avaient voulu dire."<sup>2</sup> A study of Alain's theory of perception and epistemological beliefs will help us to understand why he preferred to devote his attention to existing works of art and philosophy rather than to elaborate a system of his own.

His posthumous nomination to the "French School of Perception", alongside Jules Iagneau and Michel Alexandre, would perhaps have been the only critic's verdict suffered gladly by Alain.<sup>3</sup> His concern to describe the act of perception was briefly mentioned in the Introduction. The fact that he interpreted consciousness as an intentional act in correlation with reality and dependent on the external world for its existence ("... je n'existe pour moi-même qu'autant que je connais l'Univers autour,"<sup>4</sup> he once wrote) suggests that the act of perception was central to his theory of knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Consciousness, Alain believed, can only be said to exist when the mind is actively engaged in perceiving. He compares it to man's morning awakening when he constructs the world anew: "Oui, tous les matins n'importe quel homme reconstruit le monde;

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1. See below, p. 63-64.

2. P. 29.

3. G. Granel's article "Iagneau, Alain, Alexandre," which appeared in Traditionis traditio (1972), was first published in Critique Nos. 183-4 (août-septembre 1962) under the title "Michel Alexandre et l'école française de la perception."

4. I.A., p. 65 (see below, p. 28).

5. L.D.M., p. 740: "... bien percevoir serait le tout de la connaissance."

tel est le réveil, telle est la conscience." <sup>1</sup> Perception he sees as a way of making order out of chaos by a constructive act of mind; it is not a passive receiver of sense impressions. In this connection the "propos" entitled "Le Penseur aux Yeux Fermés" is very illuminating. In it Alain stresses the necessity of regulating one's thoughts on external reality, for:

Notre esprit a besoin de ce support, non pas une fois, mais toujours. Faute de quoi nous nous perdons en des possibles indéterminés. Ce merveilleux pouvoir de combiner, de supposer, d'expliquer, est toujours ce qui manque le moins. <sup>2</sup>

This last sentence points to Alain's mistrust of pure reason when it is divorced from other mental faculties.

It was the teaching of Jules Lagneau which led Alain to attribute such importance to the act of perception and to break with traditional scientific methods of causal explanation and with the speculative reasoning which, in his opinion, was too often considered an essential feature of philosophical activity. There is indeed much in the thought of Lagneau and Alain to suggest that, despite Alain's scorn for novelty in the domain of ideas, before Husserl, they were adumbrating his phenomenological method which consists in describing the essences of the lived experience of consciousness and in studying the way in which the latter perceives objects. Indeed, the famous tenet of phenomenology, that all consciousness is consciousness of something, was central to the thought of both Lagneau and Alain. Husserl held that scientific explanation was an inadequate tool for the apprehension of conscious phenomena and in his attempt to find an alternative to the explanatory method used by psychologists he proposed a descriptive one. In an article entitled "Remarques sur Lagneau, Alain, et la philosophie allemande contemporaine", Simone

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1. H.P., p. 15.

2. V.E., p. 184. (Propos I, p. 581).

Pétrément draws many parallels between Husserl's thought and that of Lagneau and Alain. She shows that these two French philosophers share with phenomenology, along with a mistrust of scientific and speculative reasoning, the concern to describe the act of perception:

Comme Husserl, en effet, ils estimaient que la tâche du philosophe n'est pas tant de raisonner et de prouver par déduction, que de décrire exactement ce que nous pensons quand nous pensons telle ou telle chose; avant tout, de décrire exactement ce qui se passe dans la perception. Ils avaient, eux aussi, peu d'estime pour la philosophie déductive ou spéculative; ils voulaient rester tout près de ce que Husserl nomme le "phénomène", le "vécu".

In the same article she points out that for Lagneau and Alain, as for Husserl, the "cogito" implies the "cogitatum"; consciousness is an intentional act,<sup>2</sup> it is always turned towards the world and not existing outside this intentional relationship it can not be reduced to the status of an object. "C'est parce qu'elle connaît les choses que la pensée ne peut en être une," writes the author of this article, echoing the ideas of the philosophers on whom she is commenting. It is on the basis of this epistemological claim that Lagneau and Alain's hatred of proofs and logical argument must be understood. Discussing his teacher's conviction that a proof could reduce the mind to a mere entity, Alain wrote:

"Lagneau disait quelquefois qu'une preuve à la rigueur changerait l'esprit en chose."<sup>3</sup> Although Lagneau and Alain do not speak of the "intentional structure of consciousness", many of their remarks appear to echo this idea. Lagneau claimed that "toute perception est la perception d'un objet,"<sup>4</sup> and that "toute pensée est essentiellement métaphysique; elle

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1. Simone Pétrément, Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger (juillet-sept., 1970), pp. 292-300.

2. "The real nature of consciousness is intentionality; that is, the mind is nothing more than an 'intention', not intention as the word is usually understood, but intention as a sort of 'turning toward' ..." (E. Knight, Literature Considered as Philosophy (1957), p. 17).

3. H.P., p. 80.

4. Célèbres Leçons de Jules Lagneau (1928), p. 126 (quoted by Pétrément, loc. cit.).

pense toujours l'être objectif, l'être extérieur."<sup>1</sup> Many of Alain's remarks, such as the one quoted above, also point to the dependence of consciousness on external reality: "... je n'existe pour moi-même qu'autant que je connais l'Univers autour;"<sup>2</sup> and in different terms he writes, "Nous ne pensons point sans objet."<sup>3</sup> Simone Pétrement was not alone in recognising in Lagneau and Alain fore-runners of phenomenology. O. Reboul writes, "Bien avant Husserl, Alain refuse toute conscience qui ne serait pas conscience de quelque chose."<sup>4</sup> However, it cannot be claimed that Lagneau and Alain were the only French philosophers to foreshadow phenomenology. In 1924 Jules Lachelier was already claiming that all awareness must be awareness of something. In "Psychologie et métaphysique" he wrote:

Il n'y a pas pour nous d'existence sans l'action d'une pensée qui la connaît et qui l'affirme: il n'y a pas en nous de pensée qui ne soit la connaissance et l'affirmation d'une existence.<sup>5</sup>

This theory of perception has important consequences when we come to consider Alain's attitude to the idealism of some philosophers. If real thoughts can only be, as Alain believes, "des pensées d'objets",<sup>6</sup> then he cannot conceive of ideas as constituting entities in an ideal world in the way in which Berkeley does. Attacking the type of idealism which the latter represents, he writes:

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1. Cit. Pétrement/<sup>from</sup> Les Célèbres Leçons de Jules Lagneau, p. 150. In this article, Lagneau's use of the term "métaphysique" is compared to Husserl's "transcendental", a point which serves to recall Alain's drawing together of the poet and metaphysician when describing Lagneau and to stress the link in his own mind between poetry and perception.
2. I.A., p. 65.
3. V.E., p. 174.
4. O. Reboul, L'Homme et ses Passions d'après Alain (1968), p. 131.
5. J. Lachelier, "Psychologie et métaphysique," Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger (mai 1885), pp. 481-516 (p. 507).
6. S.B.A., p. 455.

Un homme est fort souvent plus occupé et plus assuré de choses absentes et même de choses imaginaires, que du spectacle qu'il a devant les yeux. Le plus fameux des idéalistes, Berkeley, et un des plus fous, était un évêque, à qui le dîner venait tout fait: ... Ainsi se persuada-t-il lui-même, par des paroles, que ce monde des choses n'est pas un monde de choses.<sup>1</sup>

For Alain, on the contrary, ideas are merely "instruments pour approcher de la chose",<sup>2</sup> and cannot be said to exist in their own right<sup>3</sup> as some philosophers, or more appropriately "marchands d'idées",<sup>4</sup> mistakenly believe. Such claims as "le monde seul vénérable",<sup>5</sup> and "l'objet est le vrai régulateur de nos pensées",<sup>6</sup> point to Alain's conviction that the mind, if it is to function effectively, must regulate itself on the world which it perceives. To the philosophers whom Alain believed mistaken in their working method, he would retort: "... on ne fait pas une idée avec des idées; il faut se placer devant le monde tout nu."<sup>7</sup>

The scorn Alain entertained for the type of philosophy practised by what he called "arrangeurs"<sup>8</sup> and "prétendus penseurs"<sup>9</sup> is well known. Most of his attacks on philosophers, which re-appear at regular intervals throughout his writings, are directed against what Alain thought was their exaggerated use of the scientific method and their attitude to language, which degenerated into a mere logical tool when in their hands. When discussing the metaphysical arguments of Hume and Leibnitz Alain attempts

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1. P.M., p. 1123; see p. 6 above.

2. L.D.M., p. 738.

3. H.P., p. 16: "Et je n'ai jamais vu que les idées puissent exister en quelque sens que ce soit; mais au contraire les idées ne sont que par un mouvement dialectique qui les construit;" and p. 168: "Une idée, c'est un moyen et un outil."

4. Ibid., p. 54.

5. P.L., p. 19. (Propos II, p. 580).

6. V.H., p. 178.

7. Ibid., p. 242.

8. St., p. 751.

9. A.B., p. 954.

to illustrate his point that words permit everything and that "on prouve tout ce qu'on veut".<sup>1</sup> In conclusion to this invective against vain "logical games" he writes:

En voilà assez pour mettre le lecteur en défiance à l'égard des raisonnements sans perception. Cette précaution est contre les passions qui prouvent si bien ce qu'elles veulent.<sup>2</sup>

Alain regards this process of argument by proof as an unhealthy mechanism in which human passions have free play; unless his thoughts are regulated on external reality the philosopher is a mere "thinking machine".<sup>3</sup> Because of his interpretation of consciousness as an intentional act and dynamic force,<sup>4</sup> Alain shared Legeau's conviction that a proof could make of lived thought a fixed entity.<sup>5</sup> The danger of allowing thought to become a mechanical habit of mind is illustrated in the following extract taken from a "propos":

On voudrait bien des pensées bien prouvées, et puis n'y plus penser; cela ne va point. On dit bien que la terre tourne sans nous; mais dans notre esprit elle cesse de tourner dès que nous ne la poussons plus.<sup>6</sup>

Philosophers who indulged in logical games using abstract jargon as their counters were practising what Alain called "une philosophie d'institut": "... un jeu que l'on peut jouer bien ou mal".<sup>7</sup> Many of Alain's attacks, however, cannot be taken too seriously out of context and stem mainly from his disapproval of the methods employed by the philosophers in question. This is particularly clear when he speaks of Hegel, some of

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1. 81 Chs., p. 1164; S.B.A., p. 8.

2. 81 Chs., p. 1165.

3. V.E., p. 221.

4. H.F., p. 174: "... l'esprit n'est pas un magasin d'idées; l'esprit vrai n'est pas une somme de vérités; l'esprit vrai c'est l'esprit à sa naissance et renaissance; ..."

5. Ibid., p. 80.

6. V.E., p. 198; (Propos I, p. 607).

7. S.J.L., p. 721.



whose ideas he shares, but whose system-building he detests:

... je me joignis à Hegel sans nulle difficulté, ayant coutume d'être hégélien avant lui, et par molécules. En revanche son système ne m'a ni étonné ni séduit, pas plus qu'aucun autre, étant assuré que les systèmes ne sont jamais que des moyens ou des approches. Quant aux vérités qui tombent de Hegel comme la farine du moulin, je les ai reconnues et seulement éclairées autrement; ...<sup>1</sup>

In Alain's opinion a particular evil inherent in logical argument is that it is a form of persuasion rather than an incitement to thought, an idea for which he finds support because of the etymological link he sees between "logique" and "éloquence", both of which he considers to be arts of speech:

... la preuve ou l'argument ou la déduction en partant d'un principe supposé invincible, enfin tous les moyens de la logique, sont, comme ce dernier mot l'exprime assez, proprement des moyens de l'éloquence, ... ce n'est pas miracle si l'orateur fut le premier maître à penser, et si la prose étudiée fut d'abord une sorte de harangue, ...<sup>2</sup>

Against such tyrannical methods Alain advocates "la vraie prose, qui donne seulement à penser". His own works, which boast a total absence of systematic thought, are evidence of his respect for the reader's liberty.

This same idea is further developed in Les Idées et les Ages:

Il faut convenir qu'à proportion qu'un homme est savant et pensant, la seule proposition d'une preuve est inconvenante, et la moindre tentative de forcer tout à fait impolie.<sup>3</sup>

In the conclusion to the same chapter Alain's dislike of argument by proof is expressed in more moderate terms: "Sans mépriser la preuve, il est naïf aussi d'en trop attendre."<sup>4</sup> Alain frequently stresses his own independence of method, and, dissociating himself completely from the type of philosophy he despised, states proudly: "Des preuves, si j'en avais, je n'en donnerais point; ..."<sup>5</sup>

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1. H.P., p. 24.

2. S.B.A., pp. 219-220.

3. P. 207.

4. Ibid., p. 208.

5. H.P., p. 87.



I suggested in the Introduction that it was the poet and not the philosopher whom Alain considered the more capable of expressing reality. He felt that poets, not being hindered by logical and linguistic conventions, have more direct access to reality and that their minds are free to perceive. In the following passage he describes this fleeting moment of revelation accompanying the act of perception, a moment which the poet alone can capture:

Plus d'un poète a su regarder à des moments la souche d'arbre, le promontoire, l'immuable ornière pleine d'eau, et découvrir soudain la forme humaine en ce creux; seulement ce ne sont que des éclairs, car les vaines idées nous tentent toujours.<sup>1</sup>

Such moments of intuitive insight, which are so often experienced in the act of perception but too quickly ousted by the "vain ideas" of the reasoning mind, Alain, like many an artist curious about the nature of poetry, sees it as the task of the poet to prolong and exploit. Although not known as an artist, Alain appears to have the same insight into the creative process as artists like Froust, Baudelaire and Valéry. But the barriers between art and philosophy were slowly coming down. For Bachelard also the poet was a worthy guide for the metaphysician anxious to understand "toutes les puissances de liaisons instantanées"<sup>2</sup> without falling into dualistic modes of thought. He once described the poet as a "Phénoménologue-né",<sup>3</sup> and if we consider the close connection in Alain's mind between poetic inspiration and perception it would seem that he also conceived of the poet as a "born phenomenologist". Paradoxical though it may appear, the true thinker should not indulge in the activity of thinking:

Le vrai pensif, comme celui de Michel-Ange, a un visage d'enfant; c'est qu'il exerce alors sa ruse, qui est de ne penser à rien. Il

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1. P.L., pp. 150-151: (Propos I, p.1074).

2. G. Bachelard, L'Intuition de l'Instant (1932), p. 111.

3. Ibid.; J. Lescaur, "Introduction à la poésie de Bachelard," p. 126.

n'y a que le poète, peut-être, qui sache bien ces choses; car, une difficulté de rime, quel merveilleux ajournement de pensées.<sup>1</sup>

Behind Alain's own writings there lies an attempt to avoid these "vain ideas" and to cultivate the mental disposition of the poet. In Histoire de mes Pensées he writes: "... j'arrivais à prendre la plume, bien éveillé alors, et à écrire mon titre dans un vide d'idées."<sup>2</sup> There is evidence of a similar "adjournment of thoughts" in the "propos", whose limited length was a guard against the extravagances of the reasoning mind, which, like the imagination itself, can become a dangerous passion.

As for the imagination itself, which is of course central to our subject, Alain describes it in the Système des Beaux-Arts as "une perception fausse"<sup>3</sup> and a source of mental and bodily disorder, interpreting it as a faculty of limited epistemological value when it is not engaged in any external, structured activity. His interpretation here, as in many other cases, coincides with linguistic usage:

Car, si l'on entend ce mot selon l'usage, l'imagination n'est pas seulement, ni même principalement, un pouvoir contemplatif de l'esprit, mais surtout l'erreur et le désordre entrant dans l'esprit en même temps que le tumulte du corps.<sup>4</sup>

Alain considered that the artist should not indulge what he believed were the crude fantasies of his imagination, but that he should discipline them by maintaining direct contact with the immediacy of the perceived world: "... se tenant plus près de la chose, l'artiste l'interroge et la détermine, comme s'il demandait secours à la nature contre ses propres

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1. P.L., p. 95. (Propos I, p. 1145).

2. P. 142.

3. S.B.A., p. 228: "L'imagination serait donc une perception fausse." And p. 229: "Disons donc que la perception est une recherche du vrai de l'objet par une enquête qui élimine, autant que possible, ce qui tient à la situation et à l'état de notre corps, au lieu que l'imagination consiste principalement à se fier au premier témoignage, ..." Cf. below, p. 60.

4. S.B.A., p. 222.

idées, toujours inconsistantes."<sup>1</sup> The following passage aptly illustrates Alain's notion of the artist's procedure. He does not give form to images already existing in his mind, but the artefact is born out of his own contact with some aspect of reality:

Puisqu'il est évident que l'inspiration ne forme rien sans matière, il faut donc à l'artiste, ... quelque premier objet ou quelque première contrainte de fait, sur quoi il exerce d'abord sa perception. ... Car tout artiste est percevant et actif, artisan toujours en cela. Plutôt attentif à l'objet qu'à ses propres passions, ...<sup>2</sup>

Alain's view of art has been quoted by different aestheticians in recent years in refutation of what has become known as the Croce-Collingwood theory. According to this theory, artistic creation is purely a mental process and the work of art exists in the mind of the artist before it is embodied in physical form. Harold Osborne claims that Alain criticised this theory as early as 1926 in the Système des Beaux-Arts, "on the ground that it attributes too little importance to the physical medium and to the actual manipulation of the medium by the artist in the coming into being of works of art."<sup>3</sup> In illustration of this he could have quoted the following words of Alain's which directly refute Croce's theory: "Si le pouvoir d'exécuter n'allait pas beaucoup plus loin que le pouvoir de penser ou de rêver, il n'y aurait pas d'artistes."<sup>4</sup> Osborne is not the only philosopher of art to have recognised Alain's contribution to aesthetics. Richard Wollheim, commenting, in Art and its Objects, on the error involved in the Croce-Collingwood theory of art, refers the reader to Alain's Système des Beaux-Arts for "a criticism of the identification of the artist's achievement with the having of

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1. S.B.A., p. 238.

2. Ibid., p. 237.

3. H. Osborne, Aesthetics and Art Theory (1968), p. 161.

4. S.B.A., p. 238.

images".<sup>1</sup> In the bibliography to this same book, Wollheim lists Alain's Système alongside Kant's Critique of Judgement, the Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Fine Art and Gombrich's Art and Illusion as one of the works in the literature of aesthetics which he has found most valuable and suggestive.<sup>2</sup> Many of Wollheim's own views, particularly when he is talking of art as a controlling and limiting factor on the powers of fantasy and imagination, are very close to Alain's. According to Wollheim, all art involves renunciation of the immediate gratification of fantasy. This feature of art is, he believes, "shared with any activity in which there is a systematic abandonment of the pleasure principle in favour of the testing of wish and thought in reality".<sup>3</sup> He considers that the philosopher, like the artist, believing in his own omnipotence, is in danger of representing some ideal, imaginary world rather than the world as it really is, and that philosophy and art should constitute attempts to escape from the seductive powers of the imagination. This conception is very similar to Alain's belief that the philosopher should always be matching his concepts against reality, not making philosophical truths out of them. Wollheim concludes this section by criticising not only the Croce-Collingwood theory of art but, indirectly, the type of philosophy which can elaborate such a theory: "The Croce-Collingwood theory of the artist is, it might be said, a testimony to the omnipotent thinking from which, in point of fact, it is the mission of art to release us."<sup>4</sup>

Alain's own view of art is that, far from expressing inner states, it embodies ideas not previously existent. "L'art, finalement, est une action qui fait penser"<sup>5</sup> is a precept of Alain's of extreme relevance to

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1. R. Wollheim, Art and its Objects (1968), p. 148.

2. Ibid., p. 135.

3. Ibid., p. 101.

4. Ibid.

5. Propos I, p. 1290.

our subject, and one<sup>to</sup> which we shall later return to consider more fully.

Too often, because of his stress on the potentially overpowering nature of the imagination, only the negative aspect of Alain's theory of the imagination is known. To claim, as certain critics have done, that he "condemned"<sup>1</sup> or "excluded"<sup>2</sup> it is to offer an altogether false interpretation of Alain's thought. Imagination for Alain was not only "false perception" and a "maîtresse d'erreur";<sup>3</sup> it also played its part, in collaboration with the intellect, in the production of true knowledge. Alain believed that man could know the world not only through his intellect, but that all his faculties — or, to use a clichéd expression dear to Alain, "his body and mind" — should come into play. This is illustrated in a "propos" when he claims it is an error to believe "that it is the brain which thinks".<sup>4</sup> The following sentence, which provides the conclusion to this same "propos", unites the two aspects of Alain's theory of the imagination: "Imagination toujours ramenée, mais il faut qu'elle bondisse d'abord."<sup>5</sup> He believes that the flights of the imagination can contribute to the acquisition of knowledge if they are brought under control. Imagination plays a central part, then, in Alain's own working method, which developed out of his conviction, ~~quoted in the~~ ~~De France~~ that "l'entendement ne peut paraître que dans cette poursuite de l'entendement à travers ce qui n'est pas lui."<sup>6</sup>

Alain's original contribution to the aesthetic scene in France after the First World War did not, however, pass unnoticed. In 1937 one critic wrote of him:

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1. G. Bénézé, "L'homme et le philosophe," Mercur de France, 1/xii/1951,
  2. Jeanne Bornis, L'Imagination (1969), p. 6. p. 651.
  3. S.B.A., p. 222.
  4. P.R., p. 43 (Propos I, p. 213).
  5. P.R., p. 45; (Propos I, p. 214).
  6. Déd.M.M.-L., P.S., p. xxiii.

... il ne faut pas oublier qu'il a été, par les thèses puissantes de l'imagination actuelle et de l'improvisation poétique, un de ceux qui, avec M. Paul Valéry, ont renouvelé l'esthétique française au lendemain de la guerre, et que probablement plus d'un penseur à venir verra dans l'esthétique son apport le plus original à la critique d'idées.<sup>1</sup>

Georges Canguilhem points to the fact that the Système des Beaux-Arts was an "invention solitaire"<sup>2</sup> and that it preceded the aesthetic theories of Froust, Valéry and Sartre, who were to share many of the ideas developed in it. The fact that Alain's contribution to aesthetics has been widely recognised makes one wonder what degree of short-sightedness led one French critic to write of Alain, "... je sais que son Système des Beaux-Arts ne vaut exactement rien."<sup>3</sup> Basing his criticism on the absence, in the Système, of examples -- it is true that Alain rarely refers to works of art -- and massive errors of judgement on Alain's part, François Tosca concludes:

"Totalemant dépourvu de tout sens esthétique, Alain ne fut qu'un manieur d'idées, auquel le monde des formes et des couleurs demeure toujours clos. Son Système des Beaux-Arts est un exemple typique du livre qu'il ne fallait pas écrire."<sup>4</sup>

But Alain never posed as an art critic, and if M. Tosca had been prepared to overlook what he considered to be shortcomings in the Système, he might have had the good fortune to appreciate in what respect it constitutes a highly original aesthetic theory. This misjudgement of Alain illustrates the difficulties involved in reading him. One must look into the heart of the paradoxes and contradictions which can, at first sight, make his work appear superficial and lacking in seriousness, but which, in fact, attest to the range and depth of his thought.

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1. I.W. Alexander, "Le relatif et l'actuel. En marge des pensées d'Alain," Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger (nov.-déc. 1937), p. 155.

2. G. Canguilhem, "Réflexions sur la création artistique selon Alain," R.M.M. (jan.-mars 1952), pp. 171-186.

3. F. Tosca, De Diderot à Valéry: les Ecrivains et les Arts Visuels (1960), p. 135.

4. Ibid., p. 140.

It follows from Alain's theory of the imagination discussed above that the arts are for him primarily of cathartic value. "The imagination," he writes, "needs objects." "Ainsi les arts se montrent déjà comme remèdes à la rêverie, toujours errante et triste."<sup>1</sup> If Alain associates one form of imagination with "tristesse", the link in his mind between happiness and the type of mental organising to be found in all forms of intellectual activity is everywhere apparent. The following extract suggests at first that there is some contradiction in Alain's mind, but when we consider that the happiness in question is derived from an awareness of the potential of the human mind, this impression vanishes: "... ce monde encore dans le chaos me pénétrait de bonheur. Je n'étais pas pressé de le construire et de me séparer de lui."<sup>2</sup> Such mental relaxation is only a form of "bonheur" because it is a prelude to the experiencing of the mind's full capacity. Alain's use of the word "bonheur" here is strikingly similar to Kant's conception of happiness as being "the satisfaction of all our inclinations (die Befriedigung aller unserer Neigungen)".<sup>3</sup> This interpretation of the concept of happiness is the most common one both in philosophy and in everyday usage, which opposes "pleasure" and "joy", both of which result from a fleeting or partial satisfaction of man's sensibility, to happiness. We have already seen in this chapter that Alain, like Wollheim, considered that the artist and the philosopher should have nobler aims than the mere gratification of the pleasure principle. This view is also shared by I.A. Richards, who considers works of art to be of value if they satisfy unplaced "appetencies".<sup>4</sup> For one whose entire moral philosophy pivots

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1. S.B.A., p. 225.

2. H.P., pp. 141-2.

3. A. Lalande, Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de la Philosophie (1963), p. 116.

4. I.A. Richards, Principles of Literary Criticism (1934), p. 58.



round the value of individual effort and will-power, the interpretation of "bonheur" as a form of happiness actively achieved prevails of necessity over happiness as a state of passive contentment. In Pronos sur le Bonheur we read:

M'est avis donc que le bonheur intime et propre n'est point contraire à la vertu, mais plutôt est par lui-même vertu, comme ce beau mot de vertu nous en avertit, qui veut dire puissance.<sup>1</sup>

Self-control, "puissance sur soi", is qualified in one particular context as "une sorte de bonheur",<sup>2</sup> and this again points to the extreme importance Alain attached to the controlling of human passions:

Au contraire, le langage poétique par sa seule vertu de musique communique une majesté à celui qui récite, une retenue, une puissance sur soi, c'est-à-dire une sorte de bonheur.

This adoration of the human will caused one critic to speak of Alain's "volontarisme",<sup>3</sup> and this is perhaps the only label which aptly describes the tenor of his writings. He himself, in Histoire de mes Pensées, speaks of his "doctrine de la volonté".<sup>4</sup> Certain key words which can be traced in all his writings characterise this "doctrine": they are "courage", "foi" and "bonheur". "... l'esprit veut tout le courage possible,"<sup>5</sup> Alain claims, and proceeds to clarify the remark:

Je n'entends pas le courage qui brave le tyran ou qui brave l'inquisition. J'entends le courage qui ne se laisse pas écraser par ce grand univers ni par la multitude de coutumes probables, et qui cherche à percer tous ces nuages comme fait la lumière; ...<sup>6</sup>

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1. P. 224. Of virtue itself Alain claims in his definition of the term, "C'est la puissance de vouloir et d'agir contre ce qui plaît ou déplaît. C'est une puissance acquise contre tous les genres de convulsion, d'enportement, d'ivresse et d'horreur ... La vertu n'est qu'efficacité; l'intention n'y est rien."
  2. V.L., p. 516.
  3. G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970), p. 213: "Au fond, la seule appellation classique qui convienne à Alain est celle de 'volontariste'."
  4. H.P., p. 27.
  5. Ibid., p. 109.
  6. Ibid.



Alain's notion of Humanity is centred on this same supremacy accorded to the will:

Ce sentiment fort, qui est un genre de foi, qui est peut-être toute la foi, on le nomme d'un beau nom, l'humanité. J'y vois tous les caractères d'une religion; qui est peut-être toute la religion. Car il faut croire, et il faut vouloir croire; ...<sup>1</sup>

Stressing the value of difficulty,<sup>2</sup> Alain claims that there is no more uplifting experience than the discovery after much effort of a previously unknown pleasure. A similar idea occurs in a moral context where action rather than passive submission is claimed to be the pre-requisite of happiness:

Faire et non pas subir, tel est le fond de l'agréable. Mais parce que les sucreries donnent un petit plaisir sans qu'on ait autre chose à faire qu'à les laisser fondre, beaucoup de gens voudraient goûter le bonheur de la même manière, et sont bien trompés.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the same "propos" he writes, "... le travail est la seule chose délicieuse et qui suffit," concluding in the final paragraph, "Toutefois il y a grande rumeur de tous contre ces bonheurs qui coûtent tant de peine, et toujours par la funeste idée d'un bonheur reçu que l'on goûterait."

Partly responsible for this prejudice are "false moralists" like La Bruyère according to whom "on goûterait et on prononcerait sur le bonheur, comme d'un fruit."<sup>4</sup> The ideal state of mind in which Alain believes that the activities of reading and writing should be conducted is described by him in terms of "bonheur". Thus he uses the expression "bonheur d'écrire"<sup>5</sup> to describe the state of mind of the writer whose art, although seemingly spontaneous, is the result of much hard work and effort, and the expression "bonheur de lire"<sup>6</sup> to oppose his own ideal reading method to

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1. P.R., p. 221.

5. H.P., p. 42.

2. See below, pp. 53 and 138.

6. A.B., p. 941.

3. P.B., p. 122. (Propos I, p. 635).

4. P.B., p. 94.

what he believes is an excessively scientific and academic one. I have in fact used these expressions as titles in this study as they seem to me to convey very important aspects of Alain's thought. The notion of "bonheur de penser", as the following passage suggests, opposes Alain's own working method to the mechanical reasoning he was determined to avoid:

Je ne m'amuse point à réfuter la vieille preuve. Comment réfuter ce qui n'est pas encore une pensée? Mais plutôt revenant à saisir comme vrai, si je peux, ce qui est tombé au lieu commun, je considère une fois de plus cette nature du triangle, ces trois droites tournantes. ... C'est ainsi que j'ai le bonheur de penser et de découvrir dans mon coin ce que Thalès savait déjà: toujours d'autre façon, car je me moque de ces preuves machinales et de ces parades trop connues; c'est ferrailleur.<sup>1</sup>

It is very significant that in Alain's mind "poetry", "happiness" and "action" are synonymous: "... tout bonheur est poésie essentiellement, et poésie veut dire action, l'on n'aime guère un bonheur qui vous tombe, on veut l'avoir fait."<sup>2</sup> These three terms point to a state of mind diametrically opposed to the intellectual passivity which can result when logical reasoning is performed without awareness of its limitations; they are also suggestive of Alain's working method which has more in common with that of the poet than that of the philosopher who trusts in his analytical capacity alone.

A modern philosopher whose views on art and philosophy are in many ways very similar to those of Alain is Karl Popper. The concept of the "third world" which enables Popper to work out a theory of the mind in relation to the universe does, I believe, help to elucidate some aspects of Alain's very similar, if less systematically exposed, epistemology. "Third world" objects are objects produced by the activity of the human mind: statements, myths, theories, works of art,<sup>3</sup> as opposed to mental

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1. V.E., p. 199; (Propos I, pp. 607-608).

2. P.B., p. 110.

3. K. Popper, Unended Quest: an Intellectual Autobiography (1976), p. 181.

processes and all subjective experiences which constitute "world two".<sup>1</sup> Thanks to these concepts, Popper is able to transform the body-mind problem and develop an objective, "biological" theory of subjective states of consciousness and of the self.<sup>2</sup> He regards himself as an "interactionist", as he sees the human mind as "an organ that produces objects of the human world three, and interacts with them".<sup>3</sup> The mind does not merely create theories and works of art but is involved in a circular process, and is, in a sense, created by them. Popper's central suggestion is that the full consciousness of self, which belongs to "world two", can only emerge through language, and through interaction therefore with the objects of "world three", by a vital "feed-back" process.<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that Alain holds the same interactionist view of mind-body states. We saw in the foregoing pages how, for Alain, consciousness does not exist unless it is consciousness of something, that it is only activated through interaction with "world one" (the world of physical objects) or "world three", to borrow Popper's terminology. Neither does Alain concede that the unconscious mind is an entity, an autonomous region of the mind inaccessible to the will. He speaks of "l'impossibilité de l'inconscient, pris comme conscience subalterne, errante, et séparée".<sup>5</sup> His attacks on Freudianism and all schools of thought which idolize the unconscious mind, must be seen in this light. The notion of the unconscious does, of course, play an important role in Alain's theory of art as a therapy, as a means of ordering and giving form to subjective states of mind and thus a way of gaining distance from

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1. K. Popper, Unended Quest ..., p. 181.

2. Ibid., p. 188.

3. Ibid., p. 189.

4. Ibid., p. 190.

5. H.P., p. 54.

them and viewing them objectively.

Popper shares Alain's opposition to the expressionist theory of art which he describes as "trivial, muddle-headed and empty".<sup>1</sup> "Everything a man or animal can do," he writes, is "an expression of an internal state, of emotions and of a personality," and self-expression is not, therefore, a characteristic of art.<sup>2</sup> He is also, as is Alain, opposed to the subjective theory of knowledge which treats "world three" objects as if they were expressions of the knowing subject, and consequently beyond criticism and refutation. Popper's alternative view of the relation of a man to his work bears a striking resemblance to Alain's. "Admitting that world three originated within us," Popper writes, "I stress its considerable repercussions on us. Our minds, our selves, cannot exist without it; they are anchored in world three. We owe to the interaction with world three our rationality, the practice of critical and self-critical thinking and acting."<sup>3</sup> Alain also considers that "world three", not the knowing subject, is, as the following pages will show, the source of all true knowledge. A comparison with Popper suggests itself too because of the value Alain attaches to effort, to difficulty, to concrete problems of the type the artist has to deal with in manipulation of his medium; in short, to all activities which enable man to exercise his will and achieve happiness — the satisfaction of all his faculties and thus full self-consciousness. I have drawn attention to such a comparison only in order to emphasize the fact that, although the richness of Alain's thought depends on its deliberately unsystematic nature, it nevertheless bears comparison with certain more systematic

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1. K. Popper, Unended Quest ..., p. 70.

2. Ibid., p. 62.

3. Ibid., p. 196.

epistemologies, such as that of Popper. One could say, therefore, that Alain's thought is intellectually as well as imaginatively consistent.

## 2. Culture and Knowledge

Alain's view of the philosopher's task, together with his own working method, provides a richer field of study today than his philosophy itself, coherent system of thought though it is.<sup>1</sup> This is partly explained by the fact that his chief concern, as I have just suggested, was not with the abstract constructions the mind was capable of producing, but with men's capacity to perceive and explore existing realities. His aim was therefore not to formulate a "new philosophy"<sup>2</sup> (the very idea of novelty in this domain was anathema to him), but to rediscover and re-interpret all "human signs"; "tout débris d'homme",<sup>3</sup> which embodied their own form of truth. In a key passage in Histoire de mes Pensées, Alain inveighs against the arrogance of certain "bons esprits" who equated truth with modernity:

... je voyais que toutes les avenues du savoir, et même du plus haut savoir, étaient occupées par cette idée que nos prédécesseurs, sans exception les plus prochains, furent plus sots que nous, ce qui d'abord emportait de bons esprits à ne recevoir pour vraies que des idées nouvelles, et à chercher des fautes dans les anciens. Cet esprit, qui est proprement moderne, puisqu'il se croit tel,

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1. G. Pascal, L'Idée de Philosophie chez Alain (1970), pp. 56-57: "Si l'on veut établir qu'Alain était un philosophe, et non un essayiste, il semble qu'il faille d'abord montrer la cohérence de ses idées, c'est à dire l'unité de sa pensée et cela revient à exposer son système."
  2. H.P., p. 213: "... mon objet n'était pas d'ajouter une doctrine à tant d'autres, mais de m'opposer au contraire à toutes ..."; and p. 29: "Je n'ai jamais cru pour ma part qu'il fût possible de trouver une philosophie nouvelle; ..."
  3. H.P., p. 205; cf. V.E., p. 191: "L'antiquité fait preuve et le signe écrit."

est en toute matière profondément opposé à la culture, qui est une sorte de culte de l'oracle humain.<sup>1</sup>

And indeed we find in Alain's works more evidence of a "cult of the human oracle" than of a desire to criticise and refute the works of his predecessors.<sup>2</sup>

The term "cult" is not too strong for one whose veneration of the great names of the past provided the inspiration behind his working method. For Alain thought and culture, which for him is "a continuous exchange with the thinkers of every period",<sup>3</sup> are inseparable. He preferred Montaigne, whom he valued for his lack of pretentious erudition, to those philosophers who presume to construct their own systems anew, starting by refuting those of their predecessors. His debt to Montaigne is acknowledged in Histoire de mes Pensées, where we read: "Parmi les auteurs réputés étrangers à la philosophie et où je cherchais aussi la philosophie, je ne dois pas oublier Montaigne."<sup>4</sup> It was Montaigne's abundant quotations, culled from the great classics of the past, which led Alain to the conviction that "l'expression immuable et en quelque sorte monumentale est la vraie source des pensées".<sup>5</sup> These quotations constitute what he calls the "îles heureuses" of the Essais. Through them he learnt to value a form of knowledge superior to that attained by refutation and construction:

lui navigue au plus près de ses citations, qui sont comme des îles heureuses. Il est tenu par l'homme, et n'est tenu que par l'homme. De là vient qu'il continue, qu'il ajoute. Non pas à la manière des

1. H.P., p. 211; cf. V.E., p. 210 (Propos I, p. 631): "J'ai connu deux ou trois hommes qui cherchaient la vérité comme une chose neuve et que les hommes n'auraient point encore aperçue."
2. H.P., p. 14. Showing his disapproval of a certain philosophical method he writes: "J'ai vécu par mon métier dans le monde des réfuteurs, détestable espèce."
3. V.E., p. 151 (Propos I, p. 471): "La culture ... qui est un continuel échange avec les penseurs de tous les temps; ..."
4. H.P., p. 151.
5. Ibid., p. 152.

philosophes qui pensent toujours bâtir sur des ruines. - Ainsi je tenais sous mes yeux la culture même, c'est-à-dire une formation et un développement de l'esprit d'après la beauté seulement, qui en effet ne trompe jamais.<sup>1</sup>

Alain has been called the Montaigne of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> and there are many reasons to suggest why a comparison between these two thinkers should have come about. First of all there is the point mentioned above, their dislike of traditional, scholastic philosophy involving argument and refutation. They share the belief that life should not be classified and compartmentalized and that the philosopher should attempt to capture its mobility. Montaigne, like Alain, is not a systematic thinker and his essays are not constructed according to a linear scheme. His dislike of intellectualism divorced from the reality of life has won him the label of "existentialist" and we have already seen<sup>3</sup> that the same epithet can be applied to Alain, who poses the world of "lived" as opposed to conceptualized meaning as the field of philosophical inquiry. The intimate style of the Essais can be compared to Alain's style in the Propos, which will be discussed in a later chapter.<sup>4</sup> Here, as in the Essais, the reader is in the presence of thought in action. Alain is "trying out" his thought in the Propos in some way, as Montaigne is trying out his in the Essais, which, again like the Propos, consist of random reflections taken from his intellectual and active life. Another point of comparison can be found in the concern of both men to re-establish the harmony of body and mind which can be too easily destroyed by the unbridled intellect. Montaigne's recognition of the important role of the physiological is expressed in the following lines, taken from his

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1. H.P., p. 152.

2. C. Mauriac, "Notre Montaigne," Hommage à Alain, N.R.F. (sept. 1952), pp. 95-97.

3. See p. 15 above.

4. See below, p.107.



essay "De l'Expérience": "C'est une absolue perfection, et comme divine, de scavoynr jouyr loialement de son estre."<sup>1</sup> Montaigne's praise of the natural is, like Alain's, paradoxical, for he believes that Nature should be tempered by judgement, reason and moderation, and that the participation of the mind in physical pleasure intensifies the quality of that pleasure. To take this comparison to further length would, however, be to digress unnecessarily from our argument. Suffice it to say that much evidence can be found to substantiate the claim that Alain is "our Montaigne".

Alain valued poets and novelists and essayists like Montaigne above philosophers because their works offered solutions to two of the fundamental problems which pre-occupied him: how to attain self-knowledge and how to overcome one's passions and achieve self-mastery. Throughout his writings he advocates familiarity with the classics of literature, the legacy of humanity, as a surer path to self-knowledge than that offered by philosophers, moralists and psychologists. In Histoire de mes Pensées he claims that "les poètes et les romanciers sont les premiers et derniers maîtres dans l'art de se connaître",<sup>2</sup> and in one of the Propos de Littérature he throws more light on his idea of culture whose aim, he claims, is to "know human nature".<sup>3</sup> Balzac and Stendhal are therefore to be recommended in this pursuit rather than La Rochefoucauld whose theoretical notions on the foibles of human nature are entirely lacking in credibility.<sup>4</sup> Balzac, Dickens and Tolstoy, to name but three of

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1. Montaigne, Selected Essays, ed. A. Tilley and A.M. Boase (1962), p. 279.

2. H.P., p. 192.

3. P.L., p. 67: "La fin de la culture étant de connaître la nature humaine, ..." (Propos I, p. 373).

4. Propos I, p. 258: "Si vous me demandiez ce qu'il faut lire pour connaître l'homme, je conseillerais plutôt de lire Balzac et Stendhal qui ont recueilli et enchâssé tant de paroles échappées que La Rochefoucauld lui-même qui s'étudie à répéter la même chanson."



Alain's favourite authors, he appreciates because they are not concerned, as are so many lesser writers, to explain, demonstrate or prove. Alain finds in Tolstoy's novels, and not in his theoretical works, his "true ideas" and "une autre vérité que celle des idées":<sup>1</sup>

Les vraies idées de Tolstoï, je les trouverai hors de sa philosophie dans ses romans, et même justement dans les romans où il n'a point voulu mettre des idées. Résurrection est une belle oeuvre, certainement, mais qui ressemble encore un peu trop à une leçon de morale. La Guerre et la Paix, Anna Karénine, voilà les purs chefs-d'oeuvre. Ce sont des livres qui ne prouvent rien. C'est une peinture vraie, sans psychologie bavarde. Rien n'est expliqué et on comprend tout; ...<sup>2</sup>

The mark of a great novelist is for Alain his ability to create a symbolic as opposed to an abstract truth. This point he makes admirably clear when he says of Dickens' Notre Ami Commun, which he prefers of all his novels "parce que tout y est couleur et aventure et non point querelle et discours".<sup>3</sup>

Il manque d'examiner ce chef-d'oeuvre si l'on veut ramener Dickens à sa nature qui ne va point par thèses et discussions, mais par symboles presque tous involontaires.<sup>4</sup>

The symbols appear to be born naturally out of the movement of the novel and not contrived by the author, thus they are "involuntary". In a remarkable article on Joseph Joubert, on the occasion of the publication of his Carnets, Alain declares where his literary sympathies lie:

J'ai cru voir ce siècle littéraire tourner un peu sur ses gonds. ... Je veux dire que Joubert n'est pas du tout un penseur qui a des principes et qui en tire les conséquences (...). En le lisant on s'aperçoit que depuis des années nous sommes la proie des dialecticiens, c'est-à-dire des gens qui prouvent quelque chose.<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to qualify Joubert's Carnets as a turning point in literary

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1. Propos II, pp. 102-3.

2. Ibid.

3. Dick., p. 879.

4. Ibid.

5. Marienne, 6e année, 15/vi/1938, pp. 1-2: "Saisons de la Littérature."

history, "tournant que j'attends depuis longtemps. Car j'ai étonné un peu en méprisant la preuve, et en tirant l'idée de l'univers des mots, où je comprends les grands auteurs." Most relevant of all perhaps to our subject is Alain's conclusion to the article: "A mes yeux voilà enfin la suite de Kant, les pensées ne viennent pas des preuves." In an Introduction to a recent edition of Joubert's Pensées, Georges Poulet compares him to Montaigne and also points to the gulf separating him, as a writer of maxims, from La Rochefoucauld.<sup>1</sup> Of Joubert's art he writes, in terms which help us to appreciate Alain's admiration for him: "L'art de Joubert est donc essentiellement métaphorique. Il consiste, par l'entremise des images, à rendre sensible et palpable ce qui est abstrait."<sup>2</sup> These words are borrowed from Joubert's conception of metaphysics which is strikingly similar to Alain's own:

L'art d'écrire en métaphysique, consiste à rendre sensible et palpable ce qui est abstrait. Y rendre abstrait ce qui est palpable en est le vice et le défaut. C'est celui de ceux qu'on a si mal appelés métaphysiciens en ce siècle.<sup>3</sup>

Convinced that the "essence" of man, his metaphysical being, is ultimately unknowable and that the philosopher's supreme folly is to attempt to define it, Alain believed that all knowledge concerning the nature of man must be derived not from speculation but from a familiarity with the various human activities which go by the name of "humanity".

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1. Joubert: Pensées, ed. Georges Poulet (1966), pp. viii-ix: "Si Joubert est un admirable écrivain de maximes, ce n'est donc pas parce que l'idée chez lui trouve par un travail d'ajustement interne sa formule définitive, c'est parce qu'elle semble émerger au contraire avec le léger appareil de mots extrêmement précis qui l'expriment, du flux lui-même imprécis, confus ou invisible de la vie mentale, de sorte que, parfaitement définie, l'idée n'en reste pas moins bordée par l'indéfinissable. Rien de plus opposé, par exemple, à la détermination sèche d'une maxime de La Rochefoucauld, excluant tout ce qui ne fait pas partie du libellé explicite de son contexte."

2. Ibid., p. vii.

3. Ibid., p. 35.

His interest in all the manifestations which constitute humanity and culture, his preference for poets and novelists to abstract and speculative thinkers, must therefore be seen as part of his attempt to understand man without defining his metaphysical being. Alain's interpretation of culture bears much similarity to that of Ernst Cassirer in his Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. For him too a study of human activities, of the works of humanity, affords more insight into the nature of man than psychological introspection, scientific investigation or mere speculation. Commenting on his work, Cassirer writes:

The philosophy of symbolic forms starts from the presupposition that, if there is any definition of the nature or "essence" of man, this definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one. We cannot define man by any inherent principle which constitutes his metaphysical essence -- ... Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature -- but his work.<sup>1</sup>

But for Alain culture was valuable on yet another count. He saw works of art as being of therapeutic aid to the emotion-tortured and introspective mind. We saw in the last section how Alain too readily identifies imagination as "false perception". This view does however give rise to a more plausible theory of the value of the art object, which he sees as a therapeutic aid to the mind tortured by its own emotions when the imagination is left idle. "... L'imagination a besoin d'objets,"<sup>2</sup> he claims in a chapter aptly entitled "Le Folle du Logis", and concludes, as we have seen, that the arts are of remedial value. Elsewhere he talks of the artist as seeking refuge in "nature"<sup>3</sup> from the inconsistency of his own ideas which become meaningless mental constructions if not regulated on external reality. If the imagination is for Alain little else than a source of emotional disorder, the function of

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1. E. Cassirer, An Essay on Man (1944), pp. 67-68.
  2. S.B.A., p. 225.
  3. Ibid., p. 37.

art, which purifies it by exteriorising it, can therefore be called "cathartic", a term which seems all the more pertinent when we consider the following reference to Aristotle in a most significant context:

Tous les arts vont à nous délivrer des passions, comme Aristote l'a fait entendre de la tragédie, sans qu'il se soit trouvé assez de commentateurs pour tirer tout à fait l'idée hors de l'image.<sup>1</sup>

Alain perhaps felt he had extended Aristotle's notion of catharsis to describe the function of all the arts which is one of offering relief from the pressure of emotions.

The term "catharsis", however, Alain did not use, preferring that of "exorcism" which is more in keeping with his pious<sup>2</sup> approach to the arts and is echoed in other religious terms used in similar contexts. It depicts more poignantly the process of the purifying of the mind, haunted by certain false assumptions. In a passage in Les Dieux he writes:

Le débat humain est celui-ci: nous cherchons la vérité, et nous ne la trouverons qu'en nous-mêmes, et par une purification, d'abord, des pensées qui dépendent de nous. C'est bien ce que signifie l'exorcisme; ...<sup>3</sup>

In Préliminaires à la Mythologie Alain talks of "la commune poésie" and "l'action, qui sont et seront toujours les plus puissants exorcismes,"<sup>4</sup> and in a "propos" on Ulysses, he again stresses the importance of action for achieving exorcism:

Tous les passionnés exorcisent d'abord les pensées par des pensées, et bien vainement. L'ancien exorcisme par le geste était le plus sage. L'exorcisme par l'action est le meilleur.<sup>5</sup>

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1. S.B.A., p. 62.

2. H.P., p. 58: "Et c'est par ce long travail, que j'appelle pieux, qu'on arrive au contact de l'Humanité réelle ..."

3. Pp. 1241-42.

4. P. 1173.

5. P.L., p. 81; Propos I, p. 565.

Elsewhere we find a more explicit account of the process. When natural phenomena inspire awe in man and excite his imagination he overcomes his fear by imposing a meaningful form on the cause of his alarm:

L'impatience de l'homme qui ne veut pas vivre avec la peur est d'agir enfin sur ce nœud d'arbre ou sur cette pierre qui refuse visage, afin d'achever le dieu. Tel est le grand exorcisme. Dans la statue quelque chose périt, c'est le dieu sylvestre, dont la substance est faite d'absence et de silence.<sup>1</sup>

Alain's religious terminology can be traced further in his repeated use of such terms as "salut" and "grâce", both of which can be achieved in the pursuit of art. Through poetry, for example, one can achieve a state of grace,<sup>2</sup> a state significantly described in Le Système des Beaux-Arts as one in which the passions lie dormant.<sup>3</sup> Another virtue which Alain sees in poetry is that it enables the mind to transcend the limits imposed upon it by the intelligence. The harmonious reconciliation of the various faculties of mind involved in the reading and writing of poetry is, Alain believes, a step on the road to salvation.<sup>4</sup> We shall see in a later chapter how the authentic philosopher is one who offers a similar form of "salut" to those tempted to heed only the "intelligence raisonneuse" and to indulge, in consequence, in what Alain considers to be the vanities of abstract reasoning.

Both the artist and the spectator or reader undergo an "exorcism" in the pursuit of their particular activity. A statue, a painting, a theatrical performance, the reading of a novel or a poem are all of great therapeutic value in that they prevent the mind from falling prey to the

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1. D., p. 1260.

2. P.L., p. 9 (Propos I, p. 911): "Le premier effet de la poésie, et avant même que l'on ait compris, est un effet de grâce, dans tous les sens de ce beau mot."

3. S.B.A., p. 266.

4. P.L., p. 151: "... il n'y a point de vérité qui nous intéresse, hors de notre salut;" and p. 27 (Propos II, p. 701): "... le poète se sauve et nous sauve ..."

emotions and indulging in unhealthy introspection. They are "remèdes" and "secours". Of the theatre Alain writes, employing the same terms:

Et le théâtre nous représente en objets nos propres drames déjà passés et dépassés, surtout jugés, ce qui est le beau remède, mais rare et peut-être impossible sans le secours du poète.<sup>1</sup>

In Alain's opinion the art of writing has a particular virtue which is not shared by the other arts; whereas they serve merely to set the mind at rest, a novel, poem or play also offers material for reflection:

Les beaux-arts, l'art d'écrire mis à part, posent certainement l'esprit, mais ne le nourrissent point. Au lieu que les écrivains disciplinent en même temps cette fureur de parler à soi qui est la pensée. Ainsi la forme belle nous détourne de rompre d'abord les maximes et les traits pour en faire monnaie selon l'humeur. Au contraire nous sommes ramenés de nos faibles réflexions à la parole humaine, qui prend par la puissance de fait.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth dwelling on Alain's notion of "pensée", pejoratively described above as "cette fureur de parler à soi", together with his use of the terms "raison" and "raisonner". As we saw in the previous section, Alain mistrusted all forms of speculative and deductive reasoning, all "raisonnements sans perception". Knowledge, he deemed, could not be acquired by the type of thinking which degenerated into a logical mechanism. Throughout his writings he frequently attacks the "polytechnicien" — his byword for the type of scientist and thinker who, he considers, places excessive trust in deductive reasoning and is unaware of its limits — and an educational system which teaches the art of reasoning at the expense of the more difficult art of thinking, two distinctly different processes according to him. Of the "polytechnicien" he writes, "dès qu'il raisonne il se garde de penser."<sup>3</sup> As this remark suggests, Alain's use of the verb "raisonner" tends to be pejorative. More explicitly

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1. P.L., p. 62 (Propos I, p. 922).

2. P.L., p. 68 (Propos I, p. 374).

3. P.Ed., p. 248 (Propos I, p. 735).

condemning a certain type of reasoning, he writes in the Système des Beaux-Arts:

Par l'usage des plaidoyers et des discours politiques, et de l'enseignement oral aussi, il s'est ainsi formé une méthode de raisonner qui est la source de la plupart de nos erreurs.<sup>1</sup>

This passion for reasoning, for logical deduction and argument by proof, has however also pervaded the written word: "Le raisonnement triomphe de la raison même dans les œuvres écrites," writes Alain in conclusion to this same paragraph. But his use of the word "raison" is somewhat ambiguous. Sometimes, as above, it implies common sense, and at times, as in the following passage, it is used pejoratively and implies logical reasoning:

J'ai plus appris dans Balzac que dans les philosophes et les politiques. Car Balzac me rejetait dans l'expérience même sur laquelle se fondent quelquefois les philosophes, mais qu'ils ne savent pas conserver en leurs ouvrages. C'est ainsi qu'ils nous égarent dans les raisons.<sup>2</sup>

The tone is even more condemning when "reason" is qualified as being one of the maddest passions: "... la raison est au fond des passions les plus folles,"<sup>3</sup> we read in El Châpitres. However, "raison" is frequently used in a non-pejorative sense in opposition to "folie" to imply the full possession of one's mental faculties. Of the poet, half-way between the "sage" and the "Pythie", Alain writes, "Il veut être récepteur universel, mais sans perdre raison;"<sup>4</sup> "raison" here can be interpreted as a form of mental censor. In a letter to Elie Halévy we again find "Raison" used (significantly with a capital 'R') in opposition to "folie"<sup>as</sup> Alain's guard

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1. S.B.A., p. 444. See also C.L. I, p. 185: "Raisonner est une méthode de panier percé;" and p. 186: "Oui il y a des esprits percés, en qui toute idée se perd et se gâche et s'évanouit; on ne trouve à la fin que quelques pauvres vieilles formules inhabitées."

2. A.B., p. 964.

3. Ep. 1231-2.

4. P.L., p. 13 (Prolog II, p. 792).



against the unconscious mind:

Tout ce qui est explicable est immoral; il faut comprendre que le vrai est inexplicable; que le vrai ne peut être que fait (au sens de faire une œuvre) et qu'on ne peut le réaliser qu'en le pratiquant; ce vrai, je l'appelle bonté, et je la détermine par: contraire à l'intelligence; mais non pas pour cela une folie; car je dis qu'elle ne peut être produite que par la Raison ...<sup>1</sup>

The belief that "explanation is immoral" is central to Alain's notion of philosophy, which he considers an activity best not indulged in by the type of mind which limits itself to deductive reasoning alone. In the same letter Alain attacks in terms stronger than any we find in his other published works the type of knowledge he detested: "... la science positive est une amusette," he writes, "et par suite elle est l'immoralité même; je voudrais qu'on l'appelât l'art d'expliquer ..." <sup>2</sup> If we bear in mind that discoveries in the sciences are the result not of the rational, "scientific", explanation of phenomena but often follow upon moments of intuitive insight, it becomes evident that Alain is only attacking the method of those whose concern it is to explain reality by fitting it into some abstract system, not of pioneer scientists whose methods are akin to those of the creative artist.

We are perhaps now nearer to elucidating Alain's notion of "pensée", referred to above as "cette fureur de parler à soi". As this example shows, it is used pejoratively to describe the process of abstract reasoning; however, when in contact with the breath-taking beauty of a work of art this process is forestalled and "le beau nous somme de penser." <sup>3</sup> A poem or a painting inspires meditation but by offering the mind an object

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1. Correspondance, p. 60.

2. Ibid., p. 59.

3. P.L., pp. 68-69 (Propos I, p. 374): "Montaigne fait bien voir le prix de ces manières de dire que des milliers d'admirateurs nous apportent, et qui sont comme des centres de méditation. Le beau nous somme de penser ... Heureusement il y a des pensées qui sont posées parce qu'elles sont belles ..."



on which to reflect it prevents vain introspection. If we consider Alain's opposition of reasoning to thinking ("dès qu'il raisonne il se garde de penser"), we can infer that for him thought is a consciously conducted activity demanding the participation of more than the reason alone, and very different from the mechanical act of reasoning. In Définitions, under the heading "Penser" we read: "C'est poser ce qui vient à l'esprit, suspendre son jugement, se contrôler soi-même et ne pas se complaire ..." <sup>1</sup> In a later chapter we shall see that Alain is extremely wary of concluding too quickly from what is given in experience but likes to explore every facet of the aspect of reality which presents itself. Stressing the need to regulate one's thoughts on observable phenomena, Alain again hints at the evil inherent in a certain kind of thought:

... le rare ou bien ce qui n'est qu'une fois égaré toujours, parce qu'il nous livre à nos seules pensées. Celui qui n'aurait vu un aimant qu'une fois serait tombé dans quelque folle théorie. Et, par exemple, cette fiction de l'île aimantée qui arrache les clous du navire ne vient pas tant d'un faux raisonnement que d'une observation trop peu suivie. Sur quoi l'on voudrait dire qu'il faut se borner à observer, et se garder de penser; toutefois ce n'est pas si simple. <sup>2</sup>

But some learned and scholarly men have not mastered this art of thought, their intelligence is too often smothered by "the canons of erudition". <sup>3</sup> Claiming that the accumulation of factual knowledge can have a stultifying effect on the mind, Alain points to the failing of the "polytechnicien": "cette impossibilité de comprendre, résultant de trop de savoir". <sup>4</sup> Many of his writings on education are in fact attacks on a system which confuses erudition and instruction with true knowledge. He speaks of men who are

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1. P. 1078 (see below, pp. 67 and 74).

2. V.E., p. 184 (Propos I, p. 581).

3. H.P., p. 27: "Je l'accusais, (Herr), d'écraser l'intelligence par tous les canons de l'érudition."

4. V.E., p. 262 (Propos I, p. 873).

supposedly "instruits", "et qui ne sont pas capables d'autre chose que de répéter la pensée de beaucoup d'autres".<sup>1</sup> By accumulating facts one only adds bars to the cage of one's mind: "un homme instruit est un homme en cage; chaque connaissance ajoute un barreau."<sup>2</sup> Convinced that this accumulation of factual knowledge has nothing to do with culture, Alain wrote, "La culture est bien autre chose que l'instruction."<sup>3</sup>

The close association in Alain's mind of the scholar and scientist with the tyrant has been considered scandalous, and this is perhaps because, as is so often the case with Alain's thought, the full implications of his claim that "tyrant and scholar are of the same essence"<sup>4</sup> have not been understood. Much of the passage in which this statement occurs gives us reason to suppose that it is the scientist or scholar specialising in some narrow field whom Alain is attacking, the "Sorbonagre" — his byword for the type of literary scholar who applies the methods of science to literature — or "polytechnicien" of today as opposed to the Renaissance scholar:

La tyrannie sera toujours raisonnable, en ce sens qu'elle cherchera toujours des spécialistes, et les cherchera de mieux en mieux, comme on voit que fait l'armée. Et la raison, au rebours, sera toujours tyrannique, parce que l'homme qui sait ne supportera jamais le choix de la liberté dans l'homme qui ne sait pas. Ainsi le tyran et le savant se trouvant alliés par leur essence, ce qu'il y a de plus odieux se trouvera de mieux en mieux joint à ce qu'il y a de plus respecté.<sup>5</sup>

What Alain reproached "savants" for most of all and the reason why he considered them tyrannical, was the fact that they helped to perpetuate the political status quo by encouraging their disciples to value the ideal

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1. G.L. II, p. 91.

2. Min., p. 44 (Propos I, p. 898).

3. P.M., p. 1164.

4. Suzanne Vayssac, Les Impostures du Langage (1976), p. 65.

5. Propos I, pp. 1051-2.

world more than the real one and to look with contempt upon those who played an active role in politics.<sup>1</sup> We have already seen that Alain considered that all intellectual activity should, like the reading of a novel, be an end in itself, not a means to an end. Many are those, however, for whom knowledge is but a means of attaining power; of his contemporaries Alain wrote: "J'ai conclu que mes confrères en pensée ne se fiaient guère à leur pensée; sans doute ne voyaient-ils là qu'un moyen de prendre importance."<sup>2</sup> Fearing that he may have been a little bold in expressing this idea, he continues nevertheless in the same vein: "Cette idée elle-même a de l'excès; mais quelquefois on se dit que toute la bêtise des docteurs vient de ce qu'ils regardent à leur puissance, et craignent jusqu'au tremblement de se tromper."<sup>3</sup> Alain's break with "la philosophie d'institut" is due in part to the tyrannical, power-seeking nature of the kind of thinker who desires to impose his own system of thought and who has the arrogance to believe that he can fit the world, with its "poussière de détails",<sup>4</sup> into his own narrow system. This expression occurs when he is talking, yet again, of the "polytechnicien" — his byword for the scientist in possession of purely theoretical knowledge of the world:

... votre élite polytechnicienne a fait voir à la guerre, où l'homme de bon sens pouvait la juger, qu'elle ignorait tout à fait le monde. Ces hommes à idées que je voudrais nommer idéalistes étaient persuadés qu'une entreprise où tout était prévu devait réussir; ... Mais l'événement réel tel que le monde nous le propose, est fait d'une poussière de détails que nul ne peut prévoir.<sup>5</sup>

In the same "propos" it is clear that the "polytechnicien", and hence the

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1. Interpretation suggested by André Buffard.

2. R.P., p. 73.

3. Ibid.,

4. Propos I, p. 1138.

5. Propos I, pp. 1138-39.

theoretical scientist, is associated in Alain's mind with the bourgeois as opposed to the working man whom Alain considered to be alone capable of knowing the world: "... notre élite a l'aisance et l'élégance d'esprit; mais en revanche elle ne s'est jamais frottée aux choses; elle n'a jamais connu que le travail d'école, qui n'est pas tout à fait le travail."<sup>1</sup> His respect for manual workers and scorn for intellectuals of the "Sorbonagres" or "polytechniciens" breed is the result of a conviction which is epistemological before it is political. This points yet again to the centrality of "artistic" perception for Alain, for it gives rise to an epistemology from which spring political and psychological assumptions. Alain considered that the real world should act as a brake on the extravagances of the reasoning mind when it is divorced from reality; we saw earlier the importance he attributed to the act of perception in this connection.<sup>2</sup> The close association in Alain's mind between physical action and authentic mental activity will be discussed in a later chapter;<sup>3</sup> Balzac he describes as an "ouvrier" and Valéry as an "artisan" because they both, like all authentic artists and thinkers in Alain's opinion, only create when discipline is imposed upon their minds by some obstacle encountered in the creative process, by what Valéry calls the "gênes exquises"<sup>4</sup> offered by the metrical form of a poem. Alain expresses his mistrust of purely theoretical thought when he qualifies "real thought" as being not "la suite d'une pensée" but "l'effet d'une nature vivante qui se développe contre l'obstacle propre".<sup>5</sup>

The "Sorbonagres" and "polytechniciens" of today would do well to

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1. Propos II, pp. 1137-8.

2. See p. 28 above.

3. See below, p. 138.  
Au Sujet d'Adonis,

4. P. Valéry, Variété in Ouvrages I, p. 476; see below, pp. 100 and 99.

5. Propos I, p. 1078.

heed Alain's warnings of the dangers of over-specialisation and the evils attendant on the compartmentalisation of knowledge. He favoured a very broad education and believed that potential scientists or economists should begin by learning Greek: "Que vous visiez la mathématique, ou la physique, l'histoire ou la morale, la politique ou l'économie, ou simplement le bonheur de penser, je commence par vous dire: 'D'abord le grec.'"<sup>1</sup> However, elsewhere he appears to value Latin above Greek as a mental exercise as it has the virtue of disciplining the mind and holding the imagination in check:

C'est une rude leçon lorsque l'intelligence, ingénieuse et ambitieuse toujours assez, est rabattue sur quelque nœud de syntaxe; ainsi nous sommes rappelés au devoir de penser humainement, j'entends sur les signes humains et consacrés, et non point selon notre fantaisie.<sup>2</sup>

Alain also values the classics because they have stood the test of time and for this reason he considers them to have a better claim on our attention than the works of our contemporaries. However, in his enthusiasm for the classics and contempt for much of what is modern Alain perhaps goes a little too far. His conviction that it is better to learn languages "by grammar and poetry" than "par grimaces",<sup>3</sup> by which he means by the imitation of a native speaker's production of sounds, cannot be taken too seriously, as the ability to speak a foreign language is not incompatible with the ability to appreciate the grammar and poetry of that language. Alain's scorn for the practical side of language learning is but one illustration of how his contempt for utility and many aspects of the technological age led him into some absurd positions. He went so

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1. Propos I, p. 1069.

2. Propos II, p. 489.

3. Ibid., p. 945 (Alain wrote, on this occasion, "... la position de la langue sur l'alvéole et contre le palais n'est pas la première précaution pour bien penser").

far as to claim that the ability to produce certain "grimaces anglaises", the 'th' or 'w' for example, has an alienating effect on the speaker:

"Comme un homme qui arrive à imiter parfaitement le ramage des salons, il n'en peut plus sortir — cette grimace est sa pensée."<sup>1</sup> As early as 1910 Alain was commenting scathingly on the intellectual climate of his day which was characterised by an increasing tendency for specialisation and the compartmentalisation of knowledge:

Le travail de l'esprit est heureusement divisé et discipliné. Chacun polit une petite pièce, sociologue, moraliste, politique, poète, dramaturge. Chacun dans son coin polit sa petite pièce détachée, qu'il appelle une idée, et personne n'assemble. O discipline, force des armées.<sup>2</sup>

The tendency which gave rise to these lines has become ever more marked with the progression of the years, to the extent that a friend of Alain's, writing on the occasion of his death, wondered whether he would be considered a true philosopher, or merely a moralist, an anthropologist, or even a sort of poet.<sup>3</sup> Alain's own dislike of all forms of specialisation is then invoked and the absurdity of the question declared: "Combien de fois a-t-il répondu lui-même qu'une telle question est absurde parce qu'il n'y a qu'une seule pensée qui est celle de tout le monde."<sup>4</sup> Aware perhaps of the response which the amateurish tone of his writings provoked in "men of instruction", synonymous for Alain with specialists in one particular branch of knowledge, he writes, attacking those whose profession it is to read:

... j'ai remarqué qu'Homère est impénétrable pour presque tous ceux dont c'est le métier de lire. Je dis plus; et me mettant dans le jeu, je dis que c'est par les mêmes causes que souvent des hommes

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1. P.E.d., p. 252.

2. Preces II, p. 189.

3. Jeanne Alexandre, "Alain à Sévigné, " Hommage à Alain, N.R.F. (1952), p. 20.

4. Ibid.

instruits ont refusé de lire plus de deux lignes de moi.<sup>1</sup>

Alain would doubtless have been overjoyed by the fact that it was not a professional scholar specialising in French literature who first translated Les Dieux into English, but a poet and a ship's carpenter.<sup>2</sup>

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1. H.P., p. 155.

2. Alain, The Gods, translated by Richard Pevear (1975).

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C H A P T E R      I I

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## CHAPTER II

### LANGUAGE

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#### 1. Language and Philosophy

Alain's concern to reinstate ordinary language as an adequate means of inquiry for the philosopher and to dispense with the technical jargon of his immediate predecessors and many of his contemporaries is one which in recent years has been shared by some philosophers of the Anglo-Saxon school. They have come to prefer ordinary language to jargon terms as the latter, being unrelated to lived experience, have acquired no discipline of their own and can only be deployed in a vacuum. In other fields experts like lawyers or scientists who use technical terms have had to learn how to do so; but, as one philosopher asks, in a plea for the use of ordinary language,

by what corresponding special sorts of work do philosophers get their supposed corresponding mastery of the concepts of "Cognition", "Sensation", "Secondary Qualities" and "Essences"? What exercises and predicaments have forced them to learn just how to use and how not to misuse these terms?<sup>1</sup>

Through experience we have learnt how to use verbs like "imagine", "know" and "think", so are justified in employing them when philosophising. Jargon words, on the otherhand, are inexcusable in a philosophical text, except in the case of formal logic, as they can be related to no known experience and become mere counters in a logical game. The "philosophie d'institut" against which Alain directs most of his bitterest attacks

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1. G. Ryle, "Ordinary language," Philosophy and Ordinary Language, ed. Charles E. Caton (1963), p. 124. First published in the Philosophical Review LXII (1953).

thrives on technical jargon:

Mais enfin ce bagage de mots, sans aucune consistance, comme sensations, états de conscience, apparences, opinions, idées, hypothèses, fait pourtant ce que l'on peut appeler une philosophie d'institut, c'est un jeu que l'on peut jouer bien ou mal.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting on the jargon words in Brunschviog's Spinoza, Alain qualifies them as "barbarisms". Words like "primitivité" and "intériorité" are offensive to him and occasion the remark, "On a le droit de faire tout ce qu'on veut, mais non pas des barbarismes."<sup>2</sup> Writing in the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, he deplores the use of such "barbarisms" as "processus", "panlogisme" and "apriorité", this time objecting that philosophy is becoming a closed intellectual system which can be penetrated only by the initiated.<sup>3</sup>

However, it was not only because of his break with the methods of the "philosophie d'institut" that Alain rejected technical jargon. He did so for the more positive reason that he deemed ordinary language sufficiently rich for philosophical reflection. In Histoire de mes Pensées he states his position clearly when he writes, "J'avais toujours juré de me passer du jargon philosophique."<sup>4</sup> He believed that the philosopher could profitably dwell on words hallowed by usage and in the ensuing lines declares his attachment to ordinary language:

C'est alors que je commençai à comprendre que les idées, même les plus sublimes, ne sont jamais à inventer, et qu'elles se trouvent inscrites dans le vocabulaire consacré par l'usage.<sup>5</sup>

Early in his career, thanks largely to the influence of Auguste Comte,

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1. S.J.L., p. 721.

2. Correspondance, p. 62.

3. R.M.M. (January 1904): "... cela est le signe que la philosophie se sépare du public éclairé et que les philosophes n'écrivent plus que pour les philosophes."

4. H.P., p. 53.

5. Ibid.

who taught him to respect language as a "living monument",<sup>1</sup> it was "le commun langage, le saint langage, le beau langage"<sup>2</sup> which came to absorb Alain's attention. From Comte he learnt the value of polysemic words which conceal fundamental truths, and these often inspired in him reflections of a philosophical nature:

Comte a cité d'admirables exemples de mots qui, pris dans leur sens populaire, sont déjà des pensées. Ainsi le mot peuple, qui, qu'on le veuille ou non, désigne à la fois tous les citoyens, et ceux des citoyens qui travaillent de leurs mains. On peut bien refuser de penser que les citoyens aux mains oisives sont négligeables devant la masse, mais on ne peut refuser de le dire et de l'écrire.<sup>3</sup>

Convinced that his native tongue was "un trésor de pensées",<sup>4</sup> Alain believed that the only task worthy of the true philosopher was the exploitation of the wealth of ordinary language. Paying tribute to Alain in Le Monde in 1968, S.S. de Sacy shows how different his method is from that of the sophists who can only manipulate proofs:

Alain mettait son honneur de penseur et d'écrivain à considérer les mots de la tribu dans la plénitude de tous leurs sens; à sauver en chacun d'eux le trésor d'expression et de réflexion accumulé sur lui de génération en génération; à penser non pas selon les preuves, que n'importe quel sophiste manipule à sa guise, mais selon la langue.

Alain was convinced of the extreme difficulty of using language consciously: "le plus difficile au monde," he wrote, "est de dire en y pensant, ce que tout le monde dit sans y penser."<sup>5</sup> In the following passage he points to the hidden areas of language worthy of meditation:

Nous restons enfants devant le langage. Si l'on a un peu réfléchi sur les racines des mots, sur leurs parentés, sur leurs résonances, sur les métaphores qui y sont enfermées, sur la vertu des liaisons, sur les doctrines que font les mots par leur enchaînement coutumier,

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1. H.P., p. 146.

2. Ibid., p. 54.

3. Ibid., p. 147.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 53.

enfin sur les marques que les grands auteurs y ont imprimées, on découvre que nul homme ne sait tout à fait bien ce qu'il dit.<sup>1</sup>

This preoccupation with language characterises Alain's writings and inspired his teaching method. In his philosophy classes he devoted much time to defining words and to commenting on the wealth of the most ordinary expressions. On his retirement, convinced that he had properly prepared his pupils for university entrance, he maintained, "qu'une analyse directe des mots usuels permet de traiter honorablement n'importe quelle question".<sup>2</sup> The results of this method are to be seen in Définitions, in which 264 index-cards are assembled, each bearing the definition of some key term.

Alain's entire writings are rich in examples of verbal analysis and his marvelling at the instructive value of the commonest expressions. When discussing the word "legend" he supports his belief that works of culture are valuable for the philosopher by pointing to the etymology of the word, for "legend", with its derivation from the Latin gerundive, means what requires to be said, or what is worth saying: "La légende signifie littéralement ce qui mérite d'être dit,"<sup>3</sup> writes Alain. For someone whose concern is to interpret the works of humanity, the legend, which man has deemed worthy of being transmitted from generation to generation, provides a valuable area of study. In the same way Alain turns to his advantage the etymological link between the words "culture" and "cult" to justify his almost reverent attitude towards language and humanity as a whole: "... il n'y a point du tout de pensée sans culture, et non plus sans culte, car c'est le même mot."<sup>4</sup> In a "propos" he points

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1. S.B.A., p. 390.

2. Eléments de Philosophie (1941), p. 11.

3. P.M., p. 1147.

4. H.P., p. 156.

to yet another nuance contained in this word, insinuating that he who aspires to culture must emulate the ploughman:

Il y a de la soumission et même de la religion dans l'homme qui laboure; car il y a loin de ce sillon noir aux moissons couleur de soleil; ... Le travail est ainsi une sorte de prière, dont on espère beaucoup, dont on n'est pas assuré. Culte et culture sont le même mot que coultre, qui est soc.<sup>1</sup>

Turning now to consider Alain's epistemological beliefs, we again find that some of the commonest words contain nuances and areas of meaning now overlooked but which point to the truth behind many of his claims. In a passage where he is commenting on Maine de Biran, Alain agrees that sight, which can function without voluntary effort, is a deceptive sense, as the word "vision" testifies:

... Car le langage populaire ne balance point, nous jetant aussitôt la plus profonde idée, puisqu'il entend par visions, ou choses seulement vues, des spectacles absolument trompeurs ...<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he writes, corroborating this idea, "... entendement vient d'entendre, ce qui nous avertit que voir n'est qu'une bâtarde façon de comprendre."<sup>3</sup> True understanding of the nature of reality cannot be achieved by sight alone; the other senses, demanding voluntary effort, must come into play. Commenting further on the word "entendre" when speaking of the popularity of Valéry with his pupils, Alain writes:

Je me suis aperçu alors que les garçons et filles, suivant la vraie méthode, chantaient ces poèmes premièrement, et ainsi se préparaient à les entendre; les entendre, mot plein de sens.<sup>4</sup>

The etymology of this word, which comes from the Latin intendere meaning 'tendre vers', suggests that it supports Alain's belief in what has become known as the intentional structure of consciousness. The particular

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1. S.E., p. 154 (Propos I, p. 731).

2. D., p. 1232.

3. E.B.M., p. 1271.

4. F. Lefèvre, "Une Heure Avec," Nouvelles Littéraires 18/11/26.

relevance of some reflexive verbs to Alain's theory of knowledge does not escape comment. "Se tromper," he claims, "est un beau verbe; c'est bien autre chose qu'être trompé. Se tromper est actif."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he writes, in the same vein:

Depuis des siècles de siècles l'homme se trompe. Il se trompe, mais rien ne le trompe. L'univers est fidèle, pur, innocent; il n'y a point de tromperie dans ce spectacle.<sup>2</sup>

It is because he heeds his passions and is deceived by "false perceptions" that man falls into error. As we saw in Chapter I, the meaning which the word "imagination" has assumed in popular use lies behind Alain's interpretation of it as "une perception fausse".<sup>3</sup>

"Se représenter" is another reflexive verb which testifies to the accurate portrayal of man's cognitive processes by the reflexive particle: "... les choses ne nous sont point présentées," writes Alain, "mais nous nous les présentons, ou mieux, nous nous les représentons."<sup>4</sup> Yet another word which inspires considerable comment throughout Alain's writings is "conscience", which again is of interest in the context of his theory of knowledge. He inveighs against the distinction made by specialists, "les gens du métier", between "conscience psychologique" and "conscience morale",<sup>5</sup> for in his opinion the word "conscience" alone implies a moral conscience: "... le public comme les auteurs n'ont point coutume de dire conscience morale; ils disent conscience, et tout est dit."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, claims Alain, "le mot psychologique n'est point du patrimoine, et ... il est très inutile de s'en charger."<sup>7</sup> As is frequently the case,

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1. A.B., p. 1244.

2. S.E., p. 260 (Propos II, p. 935).

3. See above, p. 33.

4. 81 Chs., p. 1087.

5. H.P., p. 53.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

common language supports Alain in his belief and he readily acknowledges the fact: "J'étais aidé par la langue commune, qui n'admet point d'autre sens du mot conscience que celui qui implique le jugement moral."<sup>1</sup>

There were, of course, more deep-seated reasons for this rejection of psychology which Alain shared with Lagneau and the phenomenologists. He describes this dubious science as "un refus de penser",<sup>2</sup> and talks scathingly of the psychologist's concern to isolate and analyse states of consciousness which he proceeds to name and deploy in his own kind of dialectical game:<sup>3</sup>

Il dit une sensation, une image, un souvenir, comme on dit une pierre, un couteau, un fruit; et il vous compose de tout cela une âme bien cousue; mais il n'existe point d'âme bien ou mal cousue.<sup>4</sup>

The various shades of meaning contained in the word "esprit" are exploited by Alain to point to what he considers is the most noble faculty of mind, the ability to doubt. Laughter and mockery, as the following remarks suggest, are but one means of showing that doubt and judgement are being exercised: "L'esprit est moqueur. Le commun langage, qui ne trompe jamais, nous jette au visage cet énergique avertissement,"<sup>5</sup> and elsewhere we read: "Et, par le génie de la langue, qui jamais ne trompe, ce travail de totale démolition se nomme encore Esprit."<sup>6</sup> As these frequent quotations serve to show, Alain lets pass no opportunity of calling on ordinary language to reinforce his claims.

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1. H.P., p. 190.

2. S.J.L., p. 771.

3. 81 Chs., p. 1165: "C'est ici qu'il faut traiter de cette science mal définie, car elle est dialectique dans toutes ses parties."

4. Ibid., p. 1166.

5. D., p. 1317.

6. P.M., p. 1196.

Another area of his thought which can be fruitfully approached through the analysis of key terms is that of aesthetics. The word "artiste" itself, closely associated as it is with "artisan", provides a perfect introduction to a consideration of Alain's aesthetic theory.<sup>1</sup>

"Faites donc et jugez ensuite. Telle est la première condition en tout art, comme la parenté des mots artiste et artisan le fait bien entendre." This takes us far from the popular idea of the divinely inspired poet who passively heeds the voice of the Muse; the true artist is for Alain akin to the craftsman for whom hard work alone is the prelude to inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

He believed that artistic success could only be achieved through perseverance in a certain craft and once described Valéry as the "craftsman" of the poetry trade.<sup>3</sup> The word "style" also gives rise to comment and throws light on Alain's idea of the process of literary creation. With its derivation from the Latin "stylus" meaning a writing instrument, it referred once to the act of writing rather than to the effect achieved. Alain suggests that the etymology of this word should not be forgotten as it is only in the act of writing, in the constant exercise of the craft, that style can be achieved: "... ce n'est pas par hasard que ce beau mot désigne aussi l'outil pointu qui sculptait autrefois l'écriture."<sup>4</sup>

Alain's faith in ordinary language stems not only from his mistrust of technical jargon. As he is unwilling to treat words as arbitrary, algebraic symbols, he is also pleading the case for ordinary as opposed to notational language. Philosophy, which he likens to algebra, is, he believes, a dangerous occupation for a young person: "... comme il ne

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1. S.B.A., p. 236.

2. A.B., p. 955: "L'inspiration se montre dans le travail même."

3. Déd. M.M.L. (A.D. p. xxxiii): "Car lui sait réellement comment on fait des vers; il est l'artisan de ce métier-là."

4. S.B.A., p. 469.



sait pas encore considérer avec attention la nature des choses, il en est réduit à une espèce d'algèbre pleine de notations équivoques."<sup>1</sup> Of the superficiality of this form of algebraic thinking he was evidently fully aware when he wrote: "L'algèbre allège le fardeau de savoir ce qu'on dit."<sup>2</sup> Languages like algebra and Esperanto and what Alain terms "la logistique, ou algèbre philosophique",<sup>3</sup> cannot express ideas, for, according to him, if ideas are reduced to symbols nothing is left: "L'idée a cela de remarquable que si on la déshabille on ne trouve plus rien."<sup>4</sup> The virtue of ordinary words, as opposed to algebraic symbols, lies in the fact that they say more than any definition of them can.<sup>5</sup> "Perfect" or conventional languages, which aim simply at naming objects without ambiguity, betray the true nature of language which has a more important role than one of mere definition. As Alain points out, the word resists attempts to make of it a mere sign in a conventional system; even those which have become technical terms have other connotations:

Equation, Intégrale, Convergence, Limite, sont encore des mots humains, malgré l'effort du technicien, qui voudrait ici nous faire oublier tout autre sens que celui qui résulte de la définition.<sup>6</sup>

In a "propos" on Einstein, Alain speaks of the resilience and elasticity of words which can never assume the anonymity of signs:

Algébriquement tout est correct; humainement tout est puéril. d'où je comprends une fois de plus que les mots résistent, entendez que les notions communes ne se laissent pas manier sans qu'on

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1. C.L. II, p. 231.

2. H.P., p. 85.

3. Ibid., p. 51.

4. C.L. II, pp. 263-4.

5. Ibid., p. 264: "... les mots d'usage et les liaisons d'usage sont des mots qui disent plus que leur définition, des mots qui ont feuilles et fleurs ..."

6. Etudes, p. 158.

y sente une sorte d'élasticité et comme de puissants ressorts. De ce que l'espace et le temps sont des pensées et non des choses, ce qui est d'élémentaire doctrine, il ne faut pas conclure qu'on en puisse écrire n'importe quoi.<sup>1</sup>

In his desire to avoid notational languages, what he calls "ces algèbres qui sont les langues composées pour exprimer toutes les idées possibles, brièvement et sans aucune ambiguïté",<sup>2</sup> Alain came to value the opacity and ambiguity of the word; a certain "épaisseur de matière"<sup>3</sup> which exists in poetry and "ces signes merveilleusement ambigus"<sup>4</sup> which abound in ancient texts. His attitude to language, which has been described as "poetic",<sup>5</sup> consists precisely in respecting the concreteness and opacity of the word which he cannot treat as a mere sign pointing to some reality beyond itself.

Alain's conviction that metaphor has always been the fundamental mechanism of linguistic practice and is not an artificial rhetorical device of relatively recent invention was the inspiration behind his "poetic" attitude to words. He believed that man spoke in metaphors, that he applied names to objects to which they are not now literally applicable, long before he learnt to make comparisons:

La métaphore est plus ancienne que la comparaison. On pourrait penser le contraire à la première réflexion, en voulant considérer Homère et ses comparaisons célèbres comme situées à l'origine de l'histoire humaine; ... Or, bien en arrière d'Homère, se presse un monde humain qui parle par contes, proverbes, paraboles, statues et temples, et toujours métaphoriquement.<sup>6</sup>

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1. V.E., p. 117 (Propos I, p. 398).

2. Etudes, p. 89.

3. Propos II, p. 1113.

4. Etudes, p. 161.

5. O. Reboul, L'Homme et ses Passions d'après Alain II, p. 64: "Sartre, après et d'après Alain, écrira: 'En fait, le poète s'est retiré d'un seul coup du langage instrument, il a choisi une fois pour toutes l'attitude poétique qui considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes.'" See p. x above.

6. Propos II, p. 547.

In the same "propos" he speaks of the difficulty of imagining the thought processes of primitive man,<sup>1</sup> and infers that the latter was not aware that he spoke in metaphors, that he did so "involuntarily".<sup>2</sup> Alain does not commit the error, which is commonplace among those writing on the origins of language, of suggesting that primitive man was conscious of the transference of meaning involved in the making of metaphors. He did not believe, like Max Müller, that language started its life as literal and then entered into a metaphorical period. If we share Alain's belief that man used metaphors before he was capable of drawing comparisons between material and immaterial phenomena then we can appreciate the absurdity of Müller's hypothesis that primitive man felt the need to name the principle of life so chose its outward sign, the blowing of the wind, spiritus, to express it.<sup>3</sup> The same critic, when discussing the meaning of the word "literal", writes: "We can believe that a growing awareness of the sort of something which we today mean by spirit was inextricably linked with a new use of the word for wind,"<sup>4</sup> but, he adds, "it is impossible to believe that up till then the word for wind had been semantically aloof from the sort of something." Alain is also of the opinion that words originally conveyed other meanings apart from their literal ones and that they only become literal at the end of a long historical process. He frequently comments on words which have lost almost all trace of their metaphorical origin; many of them once referred to material phenomena but now have a purely immaterial import and are only

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1. Propos II, p. 548: "Tout est mystérieux dans les origines et la difficulté est souvent de se faire une âme de primitif."

2. Ibid.

3. O. Barfield, Poetic Diction (1951), p. 74.

4. O. Barfield, "The meaning of the word 'literal'," Metaphor and Symbol, ed. L.C. Knights and B. Cottle (1960), p. 55.

used to express moral or intellectual facts. He claims, for example, that the verb "penser" originated in the world of physical reality: "Penser (peser) est fonction de peseur, non fonction de balance."<sup>1</sup>

When giving his definition of the same word he again refers to what he believes to be its metaphorical origin: "C'est peser ce qui vient à l'esprit, suspendre son jugement ..." <sup>2</sup> The verb "saisir" also attests to primitive man's capacity to express in language the analogies existing between the inner and outer worlds. In the following context it is not a mere figure of speech but describes what for Alain should be the true mechanism of the thought process:

Par l'usage des abrégés et des abstraits il se fait une pensée séparée et presque sans corps, comme si quelqu'un pensait l'astronomie sans lever la tête. Et dire qu'une telle pensée ne saisit rien, c'est plus que métaphore, ou plutôt, c'est rentrer dans le vrai par la métaphore ... <sup>3</sup>

"Saisir", when applied to the mental act, reinforces Alain's belief in the importance of the act of perception which he considers cannot be replaced by reasoning and speculation divorced from reality. So aware is Alain of the metaphorical nature of language that he devotes much attention to reviving dead metaphors, to pointing to an original transposition of meaning long since forgotten, thus re-charging the metaphor. Using the word "peindre" outside the context of painting, he writes:

... l'art du romancier est pourtant autre chose qu'un art de décrire et d'expliquer. Il faut que l'apparence revienne; il faut peindre, comme on dit; et cette métaphore vénérable dit beaucoup. <sup>4</sup>

Alain's conception of metaphor is very similar to that of Susanne Langer, for whom metaphor is "the law" governing the life of language. She sees

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1. H.P., p. 118.

2. Déf., p. 1078.

3. L.D.M., p. 728.

4. P.L., p. 130.

it as the force which makes language essentially relational and intellectual, "for ever showing up new, abstractable forms in reality, forever laying down a deposit of old, abstracted concepts in an increasing treasure of general words".<sup>1</sup>

Alain's mistrust of philosophical jargon and his scorn for the habit of using words as if they were algebraic symbols is shared by Valéry, who wrote:

Mais vous savez certainement que les mots d'"hypothèse" ou de "substance", d'"âme" ou d'"esprit" ou d'"idée", les mots de "penser" ou de "comprendre" sont les noms d'actes élémentaires ... qui, peu à peu, se sont changés de sens et de résonances extraordinaires, ou bien qui se sont, au contraire, dépouillés progressivement jusqu'à perdre tout ce qui eût empêché de les combiner avec une liberté pratiquement illimitée.<sup>2</sup>

Valéry believed that terms used in ordinary, everyday experience gradually became "debauched" as man learnt to philosophise with them, but that in poetry (as we shall see in the next section) they could be rejuvenated and resume their full meaning. Alain, for his part, attempted to restore to words their original meaning and not to "debauch" them in the way in which Valéry considered most philosophers tended to do.

Reference was made earlier<sup>3</sup> to the value Alain attributed to mythical, metaphorical or pre-rational thinking. For him, myths, fairy tales, legends and the various arts were just so many metaphorical languages bearing "truths" more worthy of commanding the philosopher's attention than those of the "philosophie d'institut". The following words contain the essential of his thinking on this subject: "La religion est un conte qui, comme tous les contes, est plein de sens. Et l'on ne demande point si un conte est vrai."<sup>4</sup> We suggested earlier that Alain, in his

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1. Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key (1951), p. 141.

2. P. Valéry, Ouvres I (1957), p. 1093: Inspirations Méditerranéennes.

3. See Introduction.

4. D., pp. 1257-8.

appreciation of the "truths" of myths and fairy-tales, by-passed the danger of not distinguishing between the true and the false.<sup>1</sup> He claims there are two kinds of "truth": the "truth" of the world of physical objects established by human observation and the "truth" of products of the human mind, such as myths (existing in what Popper calls the human "world three"), which can only be established by the intervention of the thinking subject and by critical reaction. "... il y a une vérité des contes," Alain writes, "car il y a vérité et vérité. Il y a une vérité des choses, qu'on n'aura même pas sans courage; mais il y a une vérité du courage, qui est de l'homme seulement, je dis de l'homme pensant, aimant, osant."<sup>2</sup> Religions embody their own form of truth, and Alain writes, in justification of his method:

On voit pourquoi j'ai commencé par les contes, et pourquoi je me propose d'aller de conte en conte, me tenant toujours au plus près des métaphores; et c'est le moyen de développer la commune philosophie au lieu de tomber dans la philosophie d'école qui est sans beauté.<sup>3</sup>

It might be objected here that "beauté" is not indispensable to philosophy, but Alain defends himself by referring to the epistemological value of the metaphor which awakens "l'obstacle vrai que le penseur abstrait oublie aisément".<sup>4</sup> This notion of the virtue of "l'obstacle vrai" arises out of Alain's theory of perception where the concrete, empirical object or "obstacle" is the only reliable starting point for the cognitive processes. Indeed, behind the three terms "obstacle", "objet" and "obscurité", which recur like leitmotifs throughout Alain's writings, lies the key to the understanding not only of his aesthetic theory but also

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1. See p. 19 above.

2. D., p. 1253.

3. Ibid., p. 1256.

4. Ibid., p. 1289.

of his conception of philosophy. "Philosophy without beauty" is therefore a type of philosophy which pursues too far the logical aspect of the word without taking the word itself into account. In one of the "propos" on the subject of education, reference is made to the vanity of discussions where too soon the reality of language becomes lost in the irreality of logical argument:

On a disserté sur les discussions, toujours inutiles, si souvent nuisibles, mais sans aller à la vraie raison, qui est que nous soutenons alors nos opinions, sans aucune métaphore, par une action physique continuelle.<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to explain the mechanism: "L'habitude nous prend. Dès que nous tenons une opinion, elle nous tient;" in the heat of an argument the "obstacle vrai" is lost sight of, words lose their autonomy and become mere tools. The proofs which Alain sought were however of a different order from those of the "philosophie d'école": "Ces métaphores parlées ou chantées, maçonnées, sculptées, ou peintes, sont la première preuve, et encore la dernière."<sup>2</sup>

Many other philosophers have criticised the way language is used in philosophy and Alain is not particularly original in his criticism. Wittgenstein believed that philosophers often unwittingly stray beyond the limits of language "into the kind of specious nonsense that seems to express genuine thoughts but in fact does not do so".<sup>3</sup> Popper, for his part, discovered early in his career that "the abandonment of real problems for the sake of verbal problems" is "the surest path to intellectual perdition".<sup>4</sup> He specifically attacks the British language analysts and

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1. P.Ed., p. 169.

2. P.R., p. 192 (Propos I, pp. 576-577).

3. D. Pears, Wittgenstein (1971), p. 12.

4. K. Popper, Unended Quest: an Intellectual Autobiography (1976), p. 19.

all those who hold that the task of philosophy is to assign to every concept a clear and precise definition.<sup>1</sup> Where Alain is perhaps original is in his belief that the words of ordinary language, unshorn of their rich ambiguity, overtones and connotations, are of more value to the philosopher than words to which precise meanings have been assigned.

## 2. Language and Poetry

We saw in the last section that Alain's attitude to language is "poetic",<sup>2</sup> that he likes to believe language has a reality of its own and is not merely a system of arbitrary signs. According to Roland Barthes, this attitude to language is a characteristic one among creative writers:

Au fond, l'écrivain a toujours en lui la croyance que les signes ne sont pas arbitraires et que le nom est une propriété naturelle de la chose: les écrivains sont du côté de Cratyle, non d'Hermogène.<sup>3</sup>

Alain himself refers to this famous dialogue of Plato's and likes to believe, with Cratylus, that there is an intrinsic correspondence between form and meaning. He is reluctant to accept the alternative thesis defended by Hermogenus according to which the relation between the two is purely arbitrary. Alain clearly states his position over this issue, favouring the naturalist as opposed to the conventionalist theory of language:

L'apparence, c'est que l'on peut imposer des noms comme l'on veut. Le vrai, c'est ce qui est entrevu dans le Cratyle, qu'il y a une vérité des noms et du langage. ... Les auteurs participent à cette vérité du langage, et en même temps l'assurent; aussi les

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1. K. Popper, Unended Quest ..., p. 30.

2. See p. 72 above.

3. R. Barthes, Critique et Vérité (1966), p. 52.



reconnait-on à ceci qu'un résumé de leur doctrine ne peut jamais remplacer leur doctrine, laquelle n'est nullement séparable de l'expression qu'ils lui ont donnée.<sup>1</sup>

Alain is not alone in believing that only poets and other creative writers do not betray the true nature of language: several modern poets and critics have expressed the same idea. Poets have always been tempted by the idea of a natural as opposed to a conventional language but reality bade them dismiss the naturalist theory as a seductive myth and led them to attempt to create in poetry a motivated language which would compensate for the arbitrary nature of language in its raw state. For Mallarmé, the non-mimetic nature of language was the reason for the existence of poetry:

— Seulement, sachons n'existerait pas le vers:  
lui, philosophiquement, rémunère le défaut des langues,  
complément supérieur.<sup>2</sup>

Alain himself talks of the poet's task as being one of "natural compensation",<sup>3</sup> and in another "propos" he describes the poet as one who "resurrects" language: "Quand un poète vous semble obscur, cherchez bien et ne cherchez pas loin. Il n'y a d'obscur ici que la merveilleuse rencontre du corps et de l'idée qui opère la résurrection du langage."<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes' notion of the poetic function can also be fruitfully compared to Alain's:

La fonction poétique, au sens le plus large du terme, se définirait aussi par une conscience oratyléenne des signes, et l'écrivain serait le récitant de ce grand mythe séculaire qui veut que le langage imite les idées et que, contrairement aux prévisions de la science linguistique, les signes soient motivés.<sup>5</sup>

1. I.A., p. 147.
2. S. Mallarmé, Crise de Vers, Ouvres Complètes (1945), p. 364.
3. P.Est., p. 241 (Propos I, p. 829): "... les mots sans les choses nous tromperont toujours. Mais, par une naturelle compensation, ne serait-ce point la prose du vrai poète?"
4. P.L., p. 12 (Propos II, p. 779).
5. R. Barthes, Proust et les Noms, cit. by G. Genette in "Langage poétique, poétique du langage," Figures II (1969), pp. 145-6.

In Alain's opinion the poet is trying to achieve in poetry a state of language where the words are motivated, where they express meanings rather than arbitrarily refer to them in the manner of conventional signs.

If by poetic language is meant, as it is commonly believed to mean, a bank of words more unusual, more exotic or more expressive than those in everyday use, then poetic language does not exist, for words are not poetic by virtue of their intrinsic individual qualities. Poetic language is only achieved in the act of writing where combinations of the commonest words can have the most "miraculous" results. This point Gérard Genette makes abundantly clear when he replaces what he calls the "cratylisme primaire" of language (the identification of form and meaning within one word) by the much more plausible thesis of "cratylisme secondaire",<sup>1</sup> where this effect is achieved within a poem. Like Mallarmé and Valéry, Alain is evidently tempted by "primary cratylism" but does not succumb to such an attractive but unrealistic theory as the naturalist one which identifies the word with the object it designates. He almost yields to the temptation, however, when talking of the "voix absolue"<sup>2</sup> on which the poet depends for effect, but this voice can only now be heard in very few words: "Cette voix est maintenant méconnaissable dans maison, soldat, cheval, conférence, chaise; non pas tout à fait dans fat, galop, murmure."<sup>3</sup> Here, he claims, it is the poet's task to listen for "l'ancien cri dans la parole, et de soupçonner un rapport caché entre le

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1. G. Genette, "Valéry et la poétique du langage," M.L.N. (May 1972), pp. 600-615.

2. V.L., p. 521: "... sur quoi compte le poète? Il compte sur l'ancienne voix, sur la voix absolue, qui exprimait la situation humaine, et de cette manière toutes choses."

3. V.L., p. 521.

son et le sens".<sup>1</sup> But elsewhere it becomes evident that Alain in fact only attaches slight importance to onomatopoeic effect for this distracts the reader's attention from the words as a group and from the overall form of the poem. In the Système des Beaux-Arts we can hear his hesitation on the subject. Speaking of the art of prose, he says that as it is not meant to be read aloud, effects emanating from the sonority of words "qui par le son ressemblent à la chose, comme ronflement, murmure, frisson",<sup>2</sup> would always be out of place and should be left to poetry and eloquence. But, almost as an afterthought, he adds:

Mais il y a mieux à dire là-dessus, dont la poésie et l'éloquence pourront aussi faire leur profit, c'est que, par ces moyens étrangers, le vrai mouvement du langage se trouve rompu, et l'attention se trouve détournée de l'assemblage, ce qui va contre la structure du langage, car c'est toujours par une suite de mots convenablement liés que l'on représente les objets, et l'art d'écrire tire plutôt sa puissance de l'assemblage que des mots eux-mêmes. Les imitations par le son des mots seraient donc toujours des fautes contre le goût.<sup>3</sup>

Alain constantly emphasises the comparative success in poetry of groups of words over individual words. In one of the Propos de Littérature we read:

Chaque mot trouve sa place sonore, et éclate de tout son sens, ce qui fait des idées neuves. Et voilà le poème tel que je le veux. Ce succès est miraculeux.<sup>4</sup>

The demands of the metre and the rhythm of a poem often result in what Alain calls "le miracle poétique"<sup>5</sup> which achieves perfect harmony between assonance and meaning. He illustrates this coincidence between form and content with an example of "secondary" onomatopoeia taken from Le Lac.

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1. V.L., p. 521.

2. S.B.A., p. 439.

3. Ibid., p. 440.

4. P.L., p. 29 (Propos I, p. 1176).

5. V.L., p. 520.

Of the words "Ainsi toujours poussés" he writes: "ce que la sonorité poétique exprime, les mots mêmes le disent."<sup>1</sup> All poetic devices such as the use of neologisms, archaisms, or exotic words which tend to distract attention from the overall effect of the poem, Alain deplores. The disadvantage of rare words and of slang, often considered expressive, is that "le mot décrit par l'image immédiate, et ainsi ne se prête nullement à l'analyse par liaison avec d'autres".<sup>2</sup> So, contrary to popular belief, it is with the most mundane words that poetry should be written, and it is by harmoniously combining them that the poet comes nearest to realising his "cratyllic" dream. Poetry has been described as "language at full stretch",<sup>3</sup> as language used in such a way that its full potential is realised. This conception of poetry is, I believe, very close to Alain's own. Behind his ideal of "natural" language lies a yearning for the natural reinstated by work and effort which can stretch language to the limits of its potential and achieve an effect more admirable than that present in language in its raw state. As so often in Alain, we are faced here again with the paradox of the natural achieved through art. Onomatopœic words, precisely because they already exist and are not born of the poet's craft, Alain judges less effective than what I have called "secondary onomatopœia", which occurs when the correspondence of assonance and meaning is achieved by the poet.

That words are born figurative and not literal is a conviction of Alain's which determines his theory of poetic language and his attitude to the metaphors of poets. He believes that poetry is a property of language, that "le langage enfame toute la poésie."<sup>4</sup> The following

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1. V.L., p. 517.

2. S.B.A., p. 465.

3. Winifred Nowottny, The Language Poets Use (1962), p. 123.

4. P.Met., p. 144 (Propos II, p. 547).

remark taken from a dedication of one of his works expresses the same idea: "C'est au langage qu'il faut restituer son caractère miraculeux. Alors on comprendra les vers sublimes faits des mots les plus ordinaires ..."<sup>1</sup> This belief can be compared to that of R.W. Emerson, for whom language was "fossil poetry":

As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.<sup>2</sup>

Such a view of language obviously cannot favour the classical, Aristotelian interpretation of metaphor as the ornamentation of thought. According to this traditional doctrine, derived from the conviction that the primary aim of language is to make manifest in clear unambiguous terms the bare facts of reality, metaphor is a decorative additive to language. This view, carried to an extreme by those who saw metaphor almost as an abuse of language, was widely held until the nineteenth century when the poets and theorists of the romantic school proclaimed metaphor to be inseparable from language, even organically related to it. Shelley and Coleridge were among those who helped to reinstate metaphor as an integral part of language and to destroy the myth which kept the world of reality and the world of language so irrevocably apart. The breakdown of such false antitheses as those entertained by classical thought has become increasingly apparent in the course of the present century. Henri Meschonnic's Pour la Poétique constitutes a reaction to the dualistic modes of thought which have too long prevailed in the field of literary criticism. "Seule une conception de l'œuvre comme écriture, non ornement," he writes, "peut se garder du vieux dualisme du 'fond' et de la

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1. A.D., p. xxxiv (Déd.M.M.L.).

2. R.W. Emerson, Essays, Second Series (1850): Essay I, "The Poet", p. 26.

'forme'." <sup>1</sup> In this same book he in fact mentions Alain as being among those for whom metaphor is not the result of a conscious mental act of substitution. He belongs on the contrary to a long tradition which "comprend et valorise dans la métaphore la vision, la passion, l'éclair, l'état naissant". <sup>2</sup> He could also have profitably turned to Alain's writings for examples of poetic metaphors which are pure creation and not substitutions for thoughts conceived in literal terms.

If we consider how Alain reacts to the metaphors of poets he appears to be more in tune with the ideas of today than with the classical, traditional approach to works of literature. A good metaphor in a poem is not, in Alain's view, a comparison intended to illustrate a certain idea, but the image of the facet of reality which flashed upon the poet's mind before conceptual thought came into play. <sup>3</sup> Poets who use comparisons to explain or amplify their thoughts have started on the wrong footing, for, as Alain explains in the following lines, the real world is an older reality than the world of concepts, and it is the metaphor which orientates thought:

Qui n'aime pas et n'honore pas ce monde n'est plus qu'un moine sans pensée. Nous en revenons toujours là; ce n'est qu'en s'appuyant sur l'ordre extérieur que l'âme se compose. Et tel est le principe de toute comparaison. Non pas tant que la chose ressemble à nos pensées; mais plutôt apparaît ici le sommaire de toute sagesse, c'est que c'est la chose qui a raison; et que la pensée s'en arrange comme elle pourra. On voudrait dire que la comparaison a pour fin d'éclairer nos pensées; mais si l'on considère comment les grands auteurs comparent, et qu'ils développent souvent le terme de nature, sans s'occuper de l'autre, on dira plutôt que la comparaison a pour fin de régler nos pensées, et de les faire marcher, en quelque sorte, du même pas que le monde. Ici est la puissance du poète. <sup>4</sup>

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1. H. Meschonnic, Pour la Poétique I (1970), p. 20.

2. Ibid., p. 119 fn. 2.

3. P.L., p. 19 (Propos II, p. 580).

4. Ibid., p. 18 (Propos II, pp. 579-80).

So the poet should "regulate" his thoughts on reality, not abstract aspects of that reality, in order to illustrate his thoughts. The principle outlined above, namely that the poet should follow nature, not his ideas (what Alain terms in the same "propos" "l'image vraie, non pas symboliquement vraie, mais d'abord vraie, et fragment du monde"), explains the difference between "les belles métaphores" and "les plates métaphores, où le tissu de la nature est comme déchiré".<sup>1</sup>

Alain's conception of poetic imagery is very similar to that of Mallarmé, for whom the image was the supreme creative principle in poetic style, "not merely an adornment but the poem itself":<sup>2</sup>

La poésie consistant à créer, il faut prendre dans l'âme humaine des états, des lueurs d'une pureté si absolue que, bien chantés et bien mis en lumière, cela constitue en effet les joyaux de l'homme: là, il y a symbole, il y a création, et le mot poésie a ici son sens: c'est, en somme, la seule création humaine possible.<sup>3</sup>

In one of the "propos" Alain compares the metaphors of Hugo and Mallarmé and, not against our expectations, Mallarmé's are deemed more successful; Hugo is too concerned to illustrate his ideas:

Nous voyons les choses presque toujours selon la logique du prétoire. Dans Hugo elles plaident le oui et le non; la nature se tient par les raisons. L'autre poète est ramené au rapport immédiat; il n'abrège plus ses comparaisons en métaphores; mais il faut que la métaphore soit en elle-même idée. Entendez qu'il faut, par la seule juxtaposition, et de hasard, exprimer quelque chose qui soit vrai.<sup>4</sup>

The perfect poetic metaphor is, in Alain's opinion, achieved by the chance juxtaposition of words. But when the metaphor is a contrived comparison imposed on the structure of the poem and not suggested by language itself

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1. P.L., p. 19 (Propos II, p. 580).

2. R. Gibson, Modern French Poets on Poetry (1961), p. 164.

3. S. Mallarmé, Reply to Huret's Enquête, Ouvrages Complètes (1945), p. 870.

4. P.L., p. 57 (Propos II, p. 633).



there result what Alain calls the "plates métaphores" of Hugo and Pascal. The latter, Alain claims, is no poet, for his comparisons are not inspired by external reality but spring from an inner universe, a fact which leads to the complaint, "le roseau pensant n'est point du tout roseau."<sup>1</sup> The reason which Alain suggests to explain what he believes to be Pascal's failure to achieve successful metaphors is that "il cherchait la règle de l'esprit dans l'esprit même".<sup>2</sup> If Alain chooses to be deaf to the lyricism of Pascal's Pensées, it is more likely to be for ideological reasons than because of the nature of his metaphors. He in fact praises Pascal's prose style elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> and this suggests that the above-quoted criticism of his metaphors does not exclude Alain's overall appreciation of the Pensées. In the same "propos" Alain claims that attempts at lyrical comparison in the Apocalypse are also a failure: "ce n'est qu'un rêve où la nature est rompue; ce sont des monstres pensants et qui écrasent nos pensées."<sup>4</sup> In Homer's comparisons, on the other hand, nature is faithfully followed: his lion is more than an abstract image illustrating an idea, it is a real lion "qui rôde autour des barrières".<sup>5</sup> In Homer, Alain writes, "la chaîne des forces est suivie ...; et c'est tant pis pour nos pensées; mais plutôt c'est tant mieux pour nos pensées," which paradoxically means that although thought must temporarily abandon itself to the natural image, it gains from the process in the end by being only more authentic. Lamartine is also said to achieve successful metaphors. His lake is a real lake; "observez comme les moindres traits font apparaître la loi des eaux et des rochers. Dans l'éclair lyrique

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1. RL, p. 19 (Propos II, p. 580).

2. Ibid.

3. RL, p. 95 (Propos II, p. 562).

4. RL, p. 18, (Propos II, p. 579).

5. Ibid.



les choses de nature apparaissent solides et suffisantes, nullement transformées à l'image de nos instables pensées."<sup>1</sup> The capacity not to describe — or, as Mallarmé would say, not to "name" but to "suggest"<sup>2</sup> — but to make things appear, Alain considers to be the hallmark of the good poet, and one of the ways of doing this is to use "bold metaphors":

La poésie sans poésie comme est celle de l'abbé Delille, décrit beaucoup et ne fait rien paraître. La vraie poésie décrit peu, et indirectement, souvent par de hardies métaphores qui sont très loin de la chose, comme "le pâtre promontoire" ou "ce toit tranquille"; mais la vraie poésie fait aussitôt paraître quelque chose.<sup>3</sup>

The following remark, in which Alain points to the secret behind the art of writing, throws further light on his conception of the poetic metaphor: "Il faut se mettre à écrire de façon qu'un mot en appelle un autre, et non pas de façon qu'une idée en appelle une autre."<sup>4</sup> And if poetry is inherent in language and the nature of language is metaphorical, then the poet has only to realise the potential of the word by means of "rencontres heureuses" and "le bonheur d'expression".<sup>5</sup>

We see here how Alain's view of poetry as an art which makes use of the innate resources of language does not exclude the notion of craft, so dear to Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Valéry, who consider that the poet should not invent new words but use existing language, and by minimising "idea content" and maximising the other aspects of language, should produce what Valéry has called "un langage dans un langage".<sup>6</sup> In Valéry's

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1. *P.L.*, p. 18 (*Propos* II, p. 579).

2. S. Mallarmé, Reply to Huret's *Enquête*, *Ouvrages Complètes*, p. 869: "Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois-quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner, peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve."

3. *P.L.*, p. 31 (*Propos* II, p. 687).

4. *Propos* I, p. 1289.

5. *P.L.*, p. 9 (*Propos* I, p. 911).

6. P. Valéry, *Poésie et Pensée Abstraite*, *Variété*, *Ouvrages* I (1957), p. 1324.

case, craftsmanship enables him to achieve the maximum effects of resonance and releases the expressive ambiguity of language. Commenting on the ambiguity contained in one particular line of "Le Cimetière Marin", one critic holds that all of three different interpretations are possible and that the line "may reasonably be held to suggest what it suggests".<sup>1</sup> Valéry addresses the sea as "golfe mangeur de ces maigres grillages" because (and then follow the possible interpretations)

the iron railings surrounding each tomb are corroded by the sea-air, because of the optical phenomenon whereby one looks through narrow railings at the sea, and they seem to disappear against it, and because the cemetery railings, symbolic of death, seem abolished by the contemplation of the divine.<sup>2</sup>

Such different readings can, to my mind, only enrich the poem and the reader's experience which, in its turn, becomes a creative one. There is also evidence in "Le Cimetière Marin" of Valéry's concern to use words in a way which enables them to be interpreted both according to standard usage and according to their etymology.<sup>3</sup> Discussing the fourth stanza<sup>4</sup> the <sup>same critic</sup> comments on the Latin sense of "résume" and "altitude" in his search to come to terms with the poem's rich ambiguity. Alongside the standard French meaning of these two words he includes the Latin meaning in his interpretation of the lines in which they occur. If one considers that "résume", in the line

Temple du Temps qu'un seul soupir résume,

can also mean "recovers", "renews" or "restores" and that "altitude" in the lines

La scintillation sereine sème  
Sur l'altitude un dédain souverain,

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1. G. Martin, Language, Truth and Poetry (1975), p. 267.

2. P. Valéry, Le Cimetière Marin, edited and translated by Graham Martin (1971), p. 40.

3. See p. 75 above.

4. Valéry, ed. cit., pp. 32-33.

when its latin root is taken into account, can mean "depth" as well as "height", one's appreciation of the poem, and of Valéry's skilful use of language, is intensified. It is my belief that Alain shows his appreciation of the obscurity and expressive ambiguity of "Le Cimetière Marin" in his commentary on the poem, which does not, like some other commentaries, render an injustice to the spirit of it by analysing it. Alain replies to obscurity with obscurity, but his commentary often contains an implicit appreciation of what other critics have made explicit in their analysis of the poem. Commenting on the lines mentioned above, Alain writes:

... il faut un grand préjugé pour que l'on trouve la moindre  
obscurité dans ce qui va suivre:

"Fausse captive des feuillages. —

Golfe mangeur ..."

C'est l'apparence même.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is just a way of saying that those who find these lines obscure do so because they are trying to assign to them one particular meaning when they should be responding to the obscurity and envisaging an infinite number of possible meanings. Alain was aware that Valéry's poetry only appears obscure because new meaningfulness is born of obscurity and obscurity baffles the minds of those looking for the clarity they are accustomed to, not a new form of clarity — that of meaningful poetic expression — which, paradoxically, appears obscure.

Alain's conception of poetry as compensating for the arbitrary nature of language is, however, subordinate to a more constant and more manifest preoccupation in his writings, that of the function of art in general, of which poetry is but one example, of reconciling man's intellectual and non-intellectual faculties:

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1. P. Valéry, "Charnes," commentés par Alain (1952), p. 234.

... le beau d'un poème, d'une scène dramatique, ou d'un roman, dispose aussitôt le corps impérieusement selon le bonheur, ce qui prouve que toutes les fonctions sont, pour un court moment, ensemble comme elles doivent être.<sup>1</sup>

Alain was aware of the capacity of poetry to regulate and as it were control the mechanism of language which is too often the unconsciously applied tool of an emotion-tortured mind: "le langage porte naturellement autour de lui une étrange fumée de discorde;" but, claims Alain, the noble use of words has its virtues: "... ce qui est le plus aimé c'est un récit connu, qui ne prend à la gorge qu'au moment prévu et désiré. Le conteur a découvert le noble usage des mots."<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that poetry is seen as a "consolation" for the blind mechanism which language often becomes: "La poésie est le plus ancien récit, et je croirais bien que c'est la poésie qui nous a d'abord consolé du langage."<sup>3</sup>

Alain's division of language into two categories, "langage relatif" and "langage absolu",<sup>4</sup> serves to bring the two parts of this chapter into some perspective. "Relative language" has as its prime concern the communication of factual information. This type of clear, conventional language which speaks purely to the intelligence excluding all ambiguity and mysterious suggestiveness is what Alain calls "langage dans le sens vulgaire du mot".<sup>5</sup> Words without overtones are not, in Alain's opinion, worthy of language: "Les mots du mathématicien arrivent presque à ne dire que ce qu'ils disent; aussi ce n'est plus langage ..."<sup>6</sup> He evidently deems language to be capable of higher things. The jargon and

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1. P.L., p. 68.

2. Propos II, p. 1112.

3. Ibid.

4. V.L., p. 523; S.B.A., pp. 435-437.

5. V.L., p. 527.

6. P.L., p. 60 (Propos I, p. 1171).

notational language used so constantly by philosophers and which, as we saw, Alain cannot condone, falls into the category of "relative language". In contrast to its dialectic and analytical character, it is the "affirmative"<sup>1</sup> and "synthetic"<sup>2</sup> language of the arts which constitutes "langage absolu". Alain applies this term to all forms of language which are concerned primarily with the act of communication, with the exchange of signs regardless of their meaning. Of it he writes:

Et voici ce que j'entends par langage absolu. Il y a une partie du langage qui n'a d'autre objet que lui-même; il y a un moment du langage où le langage occupe toute la pensée. ... Le pur signe, qui est le premier signe, n'a pas d'autre sens que lui-même; il va, il revient; il est confirmé par l'échange.<sup>3</sup>

The types of language which offer the most obvious examples of this pure exchange are the ceremonial arts; festivals and processions, music and dancing, where communication within an assembled group is maintained for its own sake. In any public festivities the fact that peace, victory, or an anniversary is being celebrated is irrelevant, "cela concerne l'intelligence;" writes Alain, "cela appartient à ce que j'ai nommé le langage relatif."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in the case of dancing, the maintaining of communication between individuals is all-important; when dancing "nous sommes en conversation, et nous nous disons ceci, que nous sommes en conversation. C'est bien plus qu'exprimer une chose ou une autre, c'est exprimer l'homme à l'homme."<sup>5</sup> This function of language of maintaining and affirming communication for its own sake has been termed by Malinowsky and by Jakobson after him the "phatic"<sup>6</sup> function. The referent of the

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1. S.B.A., p. 379.

2. V.L., p. 565.

3. V.L., p. 498.

4. Ibid., p. 523.

5. Ibid., p. 500.

6. P. Guizaud, La Sémiologie (1971), p. 12.

phatic message being communication itself, what is being communicated is subordinated to the making of contact between individuals.

If "relative language", the language which communicates facts, is characterised by the importance of content and the unimportance of form, in the case of "absolute language" form is, on the contrary, all-important and content only secondary. This distinction which Alain draws between two types of language, first expressed in the Système des Beaux-Arts in 1920, had already been made by Mallarmé some years earlier.<sup>1</sup> Mallarmé, however, likens the type of language which Alain later calls "relative" to a mere system of currency, not even worthy of the human voice:

Narrer, enseigner, même décrire, cela va et encore qu'à chacun suffirait peut-être pour échanger la pensée humaine, de prendre ou de mettre dans la main d'autrui en silence une pièce de monnaie ...<sup>2</sup>

Valéry also dismisses this kind of language, which, to use Alain's words, "speaks only to the intelligence",<sup>3</sup> as "non-language",<sup>4</sup> and aims in his poetry to purify language of all data derived from discursive or empirical knowledge. There can be little doubt that Alain's views on poetic language were influenced by Valéry, whose own works reveal the influence of Mallarmé, but he nevertheless has a claim to originality as he worked out the implications of this aesthetic ideal for philosophy.<sup>5</sup> Alain's idea of "absolute language" bears a striking resemblance to Valéry's ethic

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1. S. Mallarmé, Crise de Vers, Œuvres Complètes (1945), p. 368: "Un désir indéniable à mon temps est de séparer comme en vue d'attributions différentes le double état de la parole, brut ou immédiat ici, là essentiel."

2. Mallarmé, loc. cit.

3. See p. 90 above.

4. P. Valéry, Poésie et Pensée Abstraite, Variété, Œuvres I (1957), p. 1325.

5. This aspect of Alain's thought will be considered in Chapter V.

of purity applied in the field of aesthetics. Although Alain himself does not use the term "pure poetry", his attraction to this poetic ideal helps to explain his admiration for Valéry's poetry. He believes that the essence of a good poem, or indeed of any art form, cannot be abstracted and explained in "relative language", that the meaning of a poem can never be entirely captured by a prose rendering of it. Of the indefinable nature of "absolute language", one could perhaps even say of its "purity", Alain writes: "Je remarque seulement que le langage absolu se retrouve dans tous les arts, qui, en ce sens, sont comme des énigmes, signifiant impérieusement et beaucoup, sans qu'on puisse dire quoi."<sup>1</sup> This indefinable essence of art also enters into Valéry's definition of poetry when he writes: "La puissance des vers tient à une harmonie indéfinissable entre ce qu'ils disent et ce qu'ils sont."<sup>2</sup> Speaking in more general terms in the preface entitled Je disais quelquefois à Stéphane Mallarmé, Valéry envisages a language which is at the opposite pole from relative language and which is strikingly similar to Alain's conception of "langage absolu". Of the kind of language which is uttered on the most solemn or critical occasions, whether the words are sung, spoken, murmured or groaned, Valéry writes:

... ce sont paroles qui ne se peuvent résoudre en idées claires, ni séparer, sans les rendre absurdes ou vaines, d'un certain ton et d'un certain mode. Dans toutes ces occasions, l'accent et l'allure de la voix, l'emportent sur ce qu'elle éveille d'intelligible: ils s'adressent à notre vie plus qu'à notre esprit. Je veux dire que ces paroles nous intimement de devenir, bien plus qu'elles ne nous excitent à comprendre.<sup>3</sup>

Did Alain himself not claim that in the field of aesthetics understanding was subordinate to a certain state of harmony between body and mind? —

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1. V.L., pp. 500-501.

2. P. Valéry, Rhumbs, Ouvres II (1960), p. 637.

3. P. Valéry, Ouvres I, pp. 649-50.



"Le premier effet de la poésie, et avant même que l'on ait compris, est un effet de grâce, dans tous les sens de ce beau mot."<sup>1</sup> In another "propos" he talks of the almost physiological impact which "real" language should have; his terminology all but echoes Valéry's above-quoted remark: "Le vrai langage nous prend au corps, non à l'esprit; ou plutôt il va à l'esprit par voie indirecte."<sup>2</sup> In the case of poetry Alain does not, however, presume to dismiss the referential function of language altogether; a poem may have a theme, but the understanding of the theme follows an initial reconciliation of man's intellectual and non-intellectual faculties: "La puissance de la poésie est en ceci, à chaque lecture, que d'abord, avant de nous instruire, elle nous dispose par le son et le rythme, selon un modèle humain universel."<sup>3</sup> Valéry too was aware that because of the nature of language, which inevitably represents, it is impossible to achieve completely "pure" poetry; poetry, that is, from which no content can be abstracted.<sup>4</sup>

Although many of Alain's ideas on the subject of poetic language are also held by Valéry and Mallarmé, Alain did not share the conviction of these two poets that ordinary language is inadequate as a means of representation. It is for this reason that the two parts of this chapter may, at times, appear contradictory. Alain shared the poet's dream of a "natural" language achieved through art and was anxious to compensate for the arbitrary nature of conventional signs, but at the same time he devoted much energy to extolling the virtues of ordinary language, as we saw in the first part of the chapter. Valéry's criticism of ordinary

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1. P.L., p. 9 (Propos I, p. 911).

2. P.L., p. 11 (Propos II, p. 777).

3. P.Ed., p. 75.

4. P. Valéry, Calvin d'un Poète, Ouvres I (1957), p. 1457 (see D.J. Mossop, Pure Poetry (1971), p. 210).



language is that it is too lacking in individuality to express our experience, just as scientific language is too general. Alain, however, as the next chapter will, I hope, show, achieved the feat, remarkable for a philosopher, of personalising ordinary language, of endowing language with the capacity to individualise, and of avoiding the abstractions and generalisations which too often characterise the writings of philosophers. We have already seen that Valéry influenced Alain's ideas on poetic language, and I believe it possible that it was Alain who led Valéry to think of philosophy as an art form. Indeed, Alain was perhaps at the back of Valéry's mind when the latter wrote: "La philosophie doit être personnelle, reposer sur quelqu'un."<sup>1</sup> Again, when he refers to the difficulties the philosopher, like the artist, must overcome, Valéry could be describing Alain's working method in the "propos" (the subject of our next chapter):

... le philosophe est attiré hors de lui-même, sa sensibilité est excitée par l'éventuel consommateur, qui lui présente un ensemble de conditions dangereuses, de difficultés à vaincre. Cela l'engage à ne pas se satisfaire de formules qui, pour d'autres, seraient entachées de vices qui n'y seraient pas pour lui. Il se sent amené, par des considérations de sensibilité, à parfaire son œuvre. Ainsi il est obligé de se tenir en communication avec la vie ...<sup>2</sup>

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1. P. Valéry, Cours de Poétique, Yggdrasill <sup>3ème année,</sup> nos. 5-6 (25 août-25 sept. 1938), p. 71.
  2. Ibid.

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CHAPTER-----I I I

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## CHAPTER III

### THE EXPERIENCE OF THE "PROPOS": "LE BONHEUR D'ÉCRIRE"

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#### 1. The Makings of a Style

Alain's own style of writing is notorious and it is for this reason that an admirer rather hesitatingly asks whether he will ever gain a reputation as a writer: "Parmi les écrivains de la première moitié du vingtième siècle l'élira-t-on l'un des artistes, l'un des créateurs du style?"<sup>1</sup> Or will, he wonders, the myth of the obscure and difficult philosophy teacher, "rocailleux, rêche, raboteux, abrupt", continue to prevent his works from being appreciated by a wide public. "Pendant combien de temps ne le déclarera-t-on, au lieu de parler de l'écrivain, que pédagogue supérieur, analyste, ou dissociateur d'idées?"<sup>2</sup> These words were written in 1953 and it would seem that the myth which surrounds Alain's name persists today, the majority of people being aware of him as the obscure philosopher with whose texts they were confronted in the baccalauréat.

In spite of its obscurity, which they acknowledge, most of Alain's critics are eloquent in their praise of his prose style, but at the same time they have done little to explode the myth which surrounds it. "Alain déroute par son style. Son œuvre est difficile," writes M. Reboul; "on ne l'a lu que lorsqu'on l'a relu."<sup>3</sup> But is this not precisely what Alain demanded of the reader? Another critic comments in similar fashion: "Alain s'est toujours complu à un certain genre d'obscurité,"

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1. H. Mondor, Alain (1953), p. 121.

2. Ibid.

3. O. Reboul, L'Homme et ses Passions d'après Alain (1968), t. I, p. 12.

and again: "Je compris qu'Alain devait être lu entre les lignes, qu'il nous laissait une sorte de pointillé à remplir."<sup>1</sup> Again, Alain would say that to fill in the dotted line was precisely the reader's task. His obscurity is undoubtedly of the positive kind treasured by poets in their search for expressive ambiguity and new meaningfulness; it is not the result of muddled thinking. One critic talks of "the beauty of his style" and the "propos" he even describes as "ces admirables poèmes en prose".<sup>2</sup> André Maurois, even more forthcoming in his praise, says in the preface to the Pléiade edition of Alain's Propos, "Voici, à mon jugement, l'un des plus beaux livres du monde. Je le mets au rang de Montaigne et de Montesquieu,"<sup>3</sup> a judgement which in its turn receives comment from S.S. de Sacy who, in an article entitled "Du journalisme comme un des beaux-arts", concluded:

... acceptez qu'une fois dans l'histoire un homme ait su de cette école de facilité faire une école de rigueur, et en tirer la structure d'un livre où André Maurois, qui n'est ni un rustre, ni un naïf, ni un exalté, ose dans sa préface reconnaître "l'un des plus beaux livres du monde".<sup>4</sup>

G. Picon, however, finds the comparison of Alain to Montaigne rather too bold and tells of the frustration he first experienced when reading Alain, whom he found a mere pastiche of Montaigne or La Bruyère. Not until he became acquainted with Alain's intellectual development, as recounted in Histoire de mes Pensées, did he appreciate the "propos" as having been born out of reaction to the "philosophy of the schools" which Alain so much detested, and as the fruit of a long search for an authentic

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1. C. Mauriac, Hommes et Idées d'Aujourd'hui (1953), pp. 29 and 32 ("De l'obscurité d'Alain").

2. O. Reboul, L'Homme et ses Passions d'après Alain (1968), p. 12.

3. A. Maurois, Propos I, p. vii.

4. S.S. de Sacy, Lettres Nouvelles (1956), No. 39, p. 815.

modo of expression.<sup>1</sup>

As G. Picon's experience taught him, an appreciation of Alain's own intellectual development is indeed essential to an understanding of his prose style. Looking back on his early career at the École Normale and as a contributor to the Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale, Alain speaks scornfully of his "Cartesian style" which reduced reality to "une espèce d'algèbre, pleine de notations équivoques".<sup>2</sup> Some years later he wrote of these abstract philosophical articles:

Quand j'écrivais de cette manière-là, je ne voyais pas comment la forme entrouvrirait le domaine des idées; bien plutôt, je réfléchissais selon une sorte d'algèbre que je traduisais ensuite en français. Je sentais que ce n'était pas écrire.<sup>3</sup>

He was dogged by this "maladie du style"<sup>4</sup> until his years at Rouen where, thanks to his experience as a journalist, he was to realize his "destinée d'auteur".<sup>5</sup>

In the same chapter he recounts how the material conditions imposed on the journalist, the necessity of writing a short article regularly, favoured the development of what he hesitated to call "style". "Au diable le style" was Alain's attitude, and it appears to have been the right one for "voici que le style se montra de lui-même dans ces improvisations."<sup>6</sup>

As we shall see in the next chapter, writers who carefully cultivate a prose style are, in Alain's opinion, less successful than those who trust in careless improvisation. Spurred on by the demands of

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1. G. Picon, "Sur les Propos d'Alain," Moruaux de France (sept. 1956),

2. G.L. II, p. 231.

p. 114.

3. Dédicace à Mme. Morze-Lembelin, Noël 1909 (101 Propos, 2ème série).

4. H.P., p. 41.

5. Ibid., p. 55.

6. Ibid., p. 42.

his profession and by the example of Stendhal, whose precept "Ecrire tous les jours, génie ou non,"<sup>1</sup> Alain had adopted, he was at last to experience "le bonheur d'écrire". Of this triumphant moment he writes:

C'est alors que j'achetai le premier de trois cahiers que j'ai encore, où je m'exerçais tous les jours, manquant la vague souvent, m'élevant quelquefois, m'appliquant à être naturel, guettant l'inspiration subite, et la fixant. Je connus alors le bonheur d'écrire.<sup>2</sup>

Commenting further on the value of material conditions for the writer, which save him from falling prey to a less desirable form of inspiration,<sup>3</sup> Alain says, comparing his task to that of a writer of sonnets:

Et comme il faut bien se discipliner soi-même, je me trouvais à l'aise dans les deux pages de papier à lettre qui furent la mesure de mes "propos". Je voyais le terme, je l'acceptais, comme un poète qui fait un sonnet.<sup>4</sup>

As S.S. de Saey reminds us, Alain, who is rarely credited with originality, did not wait for Valéry's example before elaborating his "doctrine des contraintes" in the Système des Beaux-Arts.<sup>5</sup> According to this doctrine, successful literary art is always dependent on a pre-existing framework which imposes the necessary discipline on the writer.<sup>6</sup> In Valéry's case, the need to find a word containing a certain number of syllables and ending in a particular sound, together with the more fundamental choice of metre in poetry at a time when it was fashionable to give up this convention, inspired some of his best lines. Similarly, Alain, when writing

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1. H.P., p. 42.

2. Ibid.

3. S.B.A., p. 237: "Dès qu'un homme se livre à l'inspiration, j'entends à sa propre nature, je ne vois que la résistance de la matière qui puisse le préserver de l'inspiration exuse et de l'instabilité de l'esprit."

4. H.P., p. 69.

5. S.S. de Saey, "Diverses méthodes d'Alain," Lettres Nouvelles (mars-mai 1953), p. 338.

6. See p. 59 above.

the "propos", was "inspired" by the limited length of his newspaper column and had to fit his thoughts into a certain mould. Discussing the conditions of poetry, he talks of "la forme, vide d'abord, qui fait paraître nos pensées ..." <sup>1</sup> Later, however, Valéry's example encouraged Alain to become bolder: "Les contraintes cessent d'être de simples précautions. Même pour un prosateur, même pour le philosophe, elles deviennent le moyen de favoriser le jaillissement." <sup>2</sup> Valéry, as already noted, went so far as to call them "des gênes exquisas". <sup>3</sup> The idea that total freedom is a threat to the artist's inner security has been expressed more recently in the writings of Professor Gombrich. Using psychoanalytic terminology, he writes, making more explicit some of Alain's most deeply felt intuitions about the nature of art:

It is the ego that requires the capacity to transmute and canalize the impulses from the id, and to unite them in these multiform crystals of miraculous complexity which we call works of art. They are symbols, not symptoms, of such control. It is our ego which, in resonance, receives from these configurations the certainty that the resolution of conflict, the achievement of freedom without threat to our inner security, is not wholly beyond the grasp of the aspiring human mind. <sup>4</sup>

One of Alain's self-imposed rules which favoured the development of the style of the "propos" was never to score out a word. Just as the artist uses to his advantage all the strokes which issue from his brush, so should the writer incorporate into the body of his text every word which suggests itself to him. <sup>5</sup> In the following passage we can hear Alain's own comments on this feature of his style and on its evolution in

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1. H.P., p. 157.

2. S.S. de Sacy, "Diverses méthodes d'Alain," Lettres Nouvelles (mars-mai 1953), p. 338.  
Au Sujet d'Adonis,

3. P. Valéry, Varia, Œuvres I (1957), p. 476. See p. 59 above.

4. E.H. Gombrich, Meditations on a Hobby Horse (1963), p. 44.

5. H.P., p. 70.

general; of his early "algebraic" articles he writes:

Je sentais que ce n'était pas écrire; je commence à soupçonner pourquoi je sentais ainsi. Il fallait plus de naturel, et plus de hardiesse aussi, pour essayer franchement d'une manière de développer qui fait naître ce qui suit de ce qui précède, la réflexion ne portant jamais que sur ce qu'on vient d'écrire. Et cela ne me semble possible, quant à présent, que dans un espace de blanc limité et toujours le même, de façon que l'exécution s'élance comme il faut, et avec la condition sévère de ne pas raturer, c'est-à-dire de ne pas briser la trajectoire. Ceux qui sont curieux de littérature à proprement parler, aimeront peut-être savoir que c'est le travail de journaliste qui m'a formé véritablement.<sup>1</sup>

Scoring out is, as G. Picon observes, the prerogative of the system-building philosopher:

Raturer, c'est admettre que l'on peut prendre appui, pour mieux penser, sur ce qui fut moins bien pensé. C'est admettre que la pensée vivante peut naître de la pensée morte. Or, penser, c'est tout ou rien. Si l'on rature, on ne pense pas. (Aussi bien, si l'on procède dialectiquement, systématiquement, les premiers principes, ou les fautes dialectiques, dont on tire les pensées finales, ne sont que des ratures). Penser doit être un geste aussi plein et indivisible que celui de la main qui agit, ou trace sur le papier, d'un seul élan, le dessin magistral.<sup>2</sup>

Now Alain's thought is neither systematic nor dialectic in the "propos"; as we shall see later in the chapter, it is often at the mercy of language itself.

He was aware, however, that the "propos" were harming his reputation as a serious philosopher, for even his subsequent writings, he claimed, "ne remédient nullement à la réputation que j'eus désormais d'improviser et de m'amuser".<sup>3</sup> He characteristically added that he cared little for public opinion since this method of improvisation he had devised when writing the "propos" proved a valuable alternative to that of the traditional philosopher and his "royaume de l'opinion et de la

1. Déd.M.M.L. (101 Propos), 2ème série, Noël 1909.

2. G. Picon, "Sur les Propos d'Alain," Mercur de France (sept. 1956),

3. H.P., p. 74.



fouzohotte".<sup>1</sup> Of his method he says, "Je n'ai jamais rien trouvé qu'en tout élan et toute force;" and again, almost guiltily, "J'avoue que j'ai toujours été en flèche, et toujours hasardé et hasardeux."<sup>2</sup>

Commenting on Alain's search for a suitable form of expression for his thought, G. Picon claims that only in the "propos" does the way in which he expresses himself "coïncide avec le sentiment qu'il a de la vie de l'esprit",<sup>3</sup> which always eludes systematisation and classification. We have already seen that Alain did not consider system-building and the business of classifying and categorising reality very commendable intellectual activities. He believed that the mind could dwell more profitably on the stages of its activity preceding conceptualisation and that the authentic thinker should capture the fluidity and elusiveness of experience, not by trying to explain it, but by expressing his thoughts in the state in which they present themselves to him. There is in Alain's way of thinking and writing a certain boldness and spirit of adventure. He does not write in order to give a form to what he has already thought out — this would be dangerous as it would involve the use of ready-made categories and concepts and would therefore be less authentic — but in order to find a form for his thoughts as they appear. This process becomes more explicit if we consider the following lines in which Alain is favourably comparing his own working method with that of another philosopher:

J'y trouve un peu plus de sérieux que je ne voudrais, trop peu d'élan, trop peu de risque. Je suis porté bien plutôt à esquisser, et à finir l'esquisse, ce qui est presque toujours écrire avant de savoir. En cela je ressemble un peu au poète qui me paraît le maître à penser par excellence.<sup>4</sup>

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1. H.P., p. 64.

2. Ibid., p. 17.

3. G. Picon, "Sur les Propos d'Alain," M.F. (sept. 1956), p. 118.

4. N.R.F. (sept. 1952: Hommage à Alain), p. 302.

The art of writing is, in Alain's opinion, best described in terms of "le bonheur d'écrire" and "le bonheur d'expression";<sup>1</sup> this he learnt not from his philosophy teachers but from his experience as a journalist. Although the term "bonheur d'expression" suggests in itself a lucky, fortuitous coming together of words, the process, seemingly spontaneous, is the fruit of hard work and regular practice in the art of writing; it is rarely achieved except by one well rehearsed in his métier.

Alain often comments on the political motives behind these short articles which he contributed regularly to certain newspapers and reviews. "... je crois à propos de dire quelque chose que personne peut-être ne croira, c'est que la vocation d'écrire m'est venue de politique,"<sup>2</sup> we read in a "propos" written in 1924. He was himself aware that the political motivation behind the "propos" was by no means evident as he did not see them as a vehicle for his political ideas but as a means of arousing the individual's awareness of the importance of independence of thought. Reproached for not writing a book and systematically formulating his ideas on radicalism in it, Alain defends the "propos", described by his critics as "des feuilles volantes"<sup>3</sup> and "petits billets"<sup>4</sup> in which too much is left to the reader. He goes on to compare the relative merits of the book and the short article. Criticising what he feels to be the abuse of the book at the hands of the "Sorbonnages" and others who treated books merely as objects on which other books should be written,<sup>5</sup> he defends himself by claiming that short

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1. H.P., p. 42.

2. Propos II, p. 656.

3. Ibid., p. 316.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 317: "On ne lit pas un livre; on le consulte pour en faire un autre."

articles are more likely to catch and hold the reader's attention. There follows a revealing passage in which Alain describes how he endeavours to do this in the "propos":

Un lecteur a des passions vives, et des caprices; des éclairs, et tout d'un coup une paresse décidée. Mais je suis un chasseur d'alouettes; je fais tourner mon miroir; je recharge mon fusil; j'ai ma revanche. Je reviens, je corrige, j'explique, je répète; l'attention est comme l'oiseau; il faut perdre bien des flèches pour l'atteindre une fois.<sup>1</sup>

In the next section we shall examine the devices Alain uses to "hunt down" the reader, and particularly the use he makes, as in the above extract, of repetition and of imagery.

The distinction Alain draws in the Système des Beaux-Arts between the art of prose and the arts of eloquence and oratory, provides a useful starting point for a consideration of the structure of the "propos". Prose and eloquence, he claims, are as different from each other as the faculty of judgement is from that of reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Yet again we are led to suspect that it is Alain's mistrust of logic and the extravagances of the reasoning mind which determine his theory of prose and his prose style. Real prose, he writes,

ne reçoit point ces divisions préliminaires, ces résumés, ces rappels de principes qui sont la forme naturelle du sermon, de la plaidoirie, et des leçons magistrales. Bien mieux, si on allait au détail, on remarquerait que les liaisons de logique détonnent dans la vraie prose.<sup>3</sup>

In Alain's prose there is a remarkable absence of these "jarring" "liaisons de logique". Logical devices, "comme les donc, parce que, premièrement et deuxièmement", are sparse; they are for Alain "des axes de déroute"<sup>4</sup>

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1. Propos II, p. 317.

2. S.B.A., p. 312.

3. Ibid.

4. P.L., p. 69.

for what, he asks, has not been proved. One wonders just how far he was tempted by what he calls Mallarmé's "nouvelle logique",<sup>1</sup> by the style Mallarmé achieved by translating poems word for word with no heed for syntax. Of this method Alain writes:

Voici des substances juxtaposées, comme des pierres précieuses jointes seulement par la force du métal. Purs rapports d'existence comme la nature les montre, sans aucun pourquoi ni comment. Jeux de substantifs, et de verbes. Mettez l'esprit à ce travail; il pensera tout à neuf. Il verra tout à neuf.<sup>2</sup>

The "propos" themselves offer a similar impression of "jeux de substantifs et de verbes". Here also the combination of words is more often the result of fortuitous juxtaposition than of logical and syntactical demands. In the "propos" from which the above extract is taken, Alain favourably compares Mallarmé's method to that of Hugo:

Nous voyons les choses presque toujours selon la logique du prétoire. Dans Hugo elles plaident le oui et le non; la nature se tient par les raisons. L'autre poète est ramené au rapport immédiat; il n'abrége plus ses comparaisons en métaphores; mais il faut que la métaphore soit elle-même idée. Entendez qu'il faut, par la seule juxtaposition, et de hasard, exprimer quelque chose qui soit vrai. Or il n'y a que la nature des choses qui soit vérité par la seule existence. D'où il arrive que ce jeu substantiel cherche le monde et se borne là.<sup>3</sup>

It is because Alain does not write according to the "logique du prétoire", but prefers what he calls Mallarmé's "nouvelle logique" that his prose style is often considered difficult and obscure. But, as he says in the above extract, the reader will benefit: "il pensera tout à neuf, il verra tout à neuf" if he makes the effort.

Alain's own belief as to what constitutes poetic language, which was discussed in Chapter II, might well lead us to look to the "propos", some of which Alain himself described as "sommaires poèmes",<sup>4</sup> for

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1. P.L., p. 57 (Propos II, p. 633).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Déd.S.E. (6/xii/37).

evidence of this "secondary oratylism", of the poetic effect achieved not by words in themselves, but by their contextual arrangement, for, he tells us, "... l'art d'écrire tire plutôt sa puissance de l'assemblage que des mots eux-mêmes."<sup>1</sup> Alain deplores poetic devices which distract attention from the overall effect of the line or sentence. The disadvantage of rare or exotic words is, in his opinion, that "le mot décrit par l'image immédiate et ainsi ne se prête nullement à l'analyse par liaison avec d'autres."<sup>2</sup> The poet must play off words one against the other and not rely on the intrinsic quality, the musicality or resonance, of the individual word:

... il appelle les mots, il les ordonne d'après l'accent, le nombre, le son; c'est ainsi qu'il découvre sa pensée. Et cela ne serait point possible s'il n'y avait en tout langage, des harmonies cachées entre le son et le sens. Cette foi au langage est la foi propre au poète. Maintenant n'attendez pas que les pensées qu'il trouve ainsi, en faisant sonner son corps, tuyau sonore, soient les pensées que vous attendez d'après la logique seulement.<sup>3</sup>

The "propos" themselves betray a similar "faith in language". A study of Alain's diction, of the type of word which flows most naturally from his pen, adds little to an appreciation of his prose style, for it is less by his choice of words than by his combination of them within a certain context that Alain reveals his artistic talent. His belief that common everyday vocabulary is sufficient material for the writer who is seeking clarity of a different order from that of scientists and scholars lies behind all he wrote:

Les savants parlent jargon et parviennent à une clarté sans reproche, par watt, ampère, entropie et le reste. Ce qui est remarquable, c'est que l'écrivain ne recherche jamais la clarté par ces moyens-là.<sup>4</sup>

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1. S.B.A., p. 440.

2. Ibid., p. 465.

3. P.L., p. 10 (Propos I, p. 912).

4. P.Est., p. 254 (Propos II, p. 901).

Alongside Alain's veneration of everyday language runs his well-known mistrust of abstract words and technical jargon, discussed in Chapter II. Occasionally, as in the lines quoted below, he introduces into a passage, but ironically, and only to excuse himself for using them, the "barbarous" words of philosophical jargon:

Mais il me semble que penser avec les grands Anciens, comme fit Montaigne, et avec Montaigne, Pascal, Rousseau, Voltaire et tant d'autres silencieux dont la foule s'accroît de siècle en siècle, est une autre manière de penser en compagnie, qui diffère de n'importe quel troupeau pensant, comme dans l'Ecole, l'universel diffère du général, et la compréhension de l'extension. Pardonnez ces mots barbares ...<sup>1</sup>

The choice of the term "propos" suggests the informal style of these short articles and the way in which Alain addresses the reader on almost conversational level. He is trying neither to persuade the reader to embrace certain views, nor to win him round to his own way of thinking, but merely to arouse his interest in the matter under discussion and encourage him to exercise his judgement. The word "propos", by virtue of its derivation from propositum, can in fact mean a proposition put forward for consideration. Talking of his ideal prose style, Alain suggests that he had this meaning in mind when he started writing the "propos": "... la vraie pensée suppose et essaie, sans se lier jamais; ainsi la prose propose et expose ..." <sup>2</sup> His choice of the term "propos" here is suggestive of his method of procedure in the "propos" themselves in which he is trying out his thought rather than exposing it systematically, a fact which emphasises once again the similarities between Alain's style and that of Montaigne.<sup>3</sup> It seems to me that the tone and spirit

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1. P.Est., p. 59 (Propos II, p. 377).

2. S.B.A., p. 445.

3. See p. 46 above.

of the "propos", as the following pages will, I hope, confirm, reflect Alain's awareness of the need for a dynamic relationship between the reader and the text.

## 2. Major Stylistic Features in the "Propos"

In the following discussion of Alain's style, I intend to take his own definition of this concept as my criterion as it seems to me that other, more fashionable views, such as the Tel Quel concept, which regards style as a deviation from the norm, would leave many aspects of Alain's style unaccounted for. For Alain, style is "poetry in prose": "Le style est la poésie dans la prose, je veux dire une manière d'exprimer que la pensée n'explique pas."<sup>1</sup> It is a form of expression which does not pander to the reader's expectations, to his sense of logical and linear progression, but, as we shall see in a later chapter,<sup>2</sup> constitutes a world of expression which appeals to more than the intellect alone.

We saw in the previous section that the "propos" are characterised by their informal, conversational style. The opening sentence often takes the form of a question, a personal example or a general axiom and sets the mood of the article to follow; there being no preamble the reader's interest is immediately aroused. An interrogative structure in the first sentence can have the effect of making the reader feel he personally is being addressed: "Apprenez-vous l'esperanto?"<sup>3</sup> asks Alain

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1. A.B., p. 1013.

2. See below, p. 136.

3. Propos II, p. 18.

in one instance, and the first line of a "propos" on the vanity of fashion reads, "Pourquoi chercher du neuf?"<sup>1</sup> As if in conversation with a friend Alain often opens the "propos" with a personal anecdote. "J'ai rencontré un vigneron de Bourgogne"<sup>2</sup> is the opening line of one article which has as its main theme the social vanity of the middle classes. In similar fashion, as a prelude to reflections of a political nature, he writes, "L'autre dimanche, comme j'allais mettre mon bulletin dans l'urne je me disais ..." <sup>3</sup> Another favourite device to which Alain resorts in the opening line of the "propos" is the use of the axiom-type sentence, such as "L'amour tyrannise plus que la haine,"<sup>4</sup> or "Le matérialisme est la partie difficile de la sagesse ..." <sup>5</sup> Statements of such a nature have the effect of soliciting the reader's immediate agreement or disagreement and consequently of involving him in the ensuing line of argument.

Alain frequently intervenes to excuse or introduce his own highly original turns of phrase and bold comparisons, thus adding to the relaxed, unofficial tone of the "propos". Talking of the effect of unbridled passions, he writes, "Je sais bien que les animaux aussi se grattent, et jusqu'à se nuire à eux-mêmes; mais c'est un dangereux privilège de l'homme que de pouvoir, si j'ose dire, se gratter par la seule pensée ..." <sup>6</sup> Elsewhere he uses the expression "une attitude viscérale", adding in the next breath, "s'il est permis d'ainsi dire".<sup>7</sup> This direct comment on his own style increases the reader's appreciation of this very unusual

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1. P.L., p. 132 (Propos II, p. 649).

2. Propos II, p. 106.

3. Ibid., p. 488.

4. Min., p. 96 (Propos II, p. 1064).

5. Min., p. 167 (Propos II, p. 979).

6. P.B., p. 36 (Propos I, p. 485).

7. P.B., p. 215 (Propos I, p. 301).



juxtaposition of terms and arouses his sympathy. In the following example, Alain's intervention is not misplaced, as the image is a very bold one: "Or, dans toute action il se trouve le moment de l'emportement aveugle; mais court moment, mesuré; ainsi les dernières foulées d'une course; ou bien l'intérieur, si l'on peut dire, d'un coup de hache ..." <sup>1</sup> In another context he talks of the "houle animale" in man, adding as an afterthought, "c'est-à-dire la vraie difficulté de penser". <sup>2</sup> These direct comments which Alain introduces into the text show that he is aware of the highly original nature of his style. They also suggest that language becomes expressive in proportion to self-conscious distance on the part of the author. A particularly humorous intervention, which adds to the colloquial tone of the "propos", occurs when Alain insinuates his atheism into a passage:

Il est bon d'avoir un peu de mal à vivre et de ne pas suivre une route tout unie. Je plains les rois s'ils n'ont qu'à désirer; et les dieux, s'il y en a quelque part, doivent être un peu neurasthéniques. <sup>3</sup>

In another context, telling the reader he is not obliged to keep to Plato's image of the soul, Alain intervenes in typical fashion: "Les âmes ou ombres ou comme on voudra, sont conduites dans une grande prairie, et on leur jette devant elles des sacs où sont des destinées à choisir." <sup>4</sup>

Another feature which contributes to this conversational style is the frequent use of the connecting particle "et" at the beginning of a sentence. In one "propos" alone five sentences begin in this way and have the effect of speeding up the movement of the entire "propos". <sup>5</sup> The

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1. P.L., p. 71 (Propos I, p. 833).

2. P.L., p. 59 (Propos I, p. 1170).

3. P.B., p. 119 (Propos I, p. 26).

4. P.B., p. 83 (Propos II, p. 131).

5. Min., p. 167 (Propos II, p. 979).

omission of the verb is also very common and adds to the impressionistic, colloquial and in some cases poetic tone of the "propos". The opening and closing lines of these articles are sometimes verbless and have the effect of introducing or concluding the subject discussed in a striking manner. "Hardi! Encore un coup, les gars!"<sup>1</sup> introduces a reflection on the subject of progress, and the concluding line of another "propos", "O force de coutume!"<sup>2</sup> follows upon Alain's fears that even if his "paradoxical and violent comparisons" have momentarily roused the reader, the latter will soon fall back into indolent habits of mind. Some verbless sentences in the "propos" where natural phenomena are being described are more reminiscent of lines of poetry: "Couleurs pures, ombres dures,"<sup>3</sup> with its alliterative effect achieved in the alternation of hard and soft vowels, is a remarkable case in point. Perhaps even more striking than these verbless sentences are the isolated nouns which are cut off from the surrounding text. These nouns either announce the theme of the sentence or paragraph to follow, as in this case: "Image. Ces changements ne sont qu'une image de l'immémoriale création..."<sup>4</sup> or they echo the theme of the preceding lines: "L'animal est soumis à ces choses; mais l'homme se meut par soi, et non par le voisin. Par le voisin il est poussé. Chose."<sup>5</sup> The above lines form the conclusion to a "propos" in which the sentences become progressively shorter as the end approaches and the point of the article is thus very forcefully driven home.

We saw in the last section how the limited length of the "propos"

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1. Min., p. 197 (Propos I, p. 1263).
  2. Propos II, p. 747.
  3. S.E., p. 148 (Propos I, p. 794).
  4. S.E., p. 173 (Propos I, p. 739).
  5. Propos II, p. 982.

favoured the development of Alain's style. The necessity of ending his articles abruptly as he neared the bottom of the page gave rise to the elliptical and impressionistic sentences, metaphors and paradoxes, especially characteristic of the final paragraph. Alain himself commented on this feature of his style:

La barrière terminale se rapprochait à mesure que d'autres idées se montraient; elles se trouvaient refoulées, et, je ne sais comment, venaient gonfler l'idée principale. Il se peut que les métaphores soient une manière d'ajourner un autre problème. Certainement il y a dans le trait quand il porte bien, un poids de choses non dites et pourtant annexées à l'expression. De là une sorte de poésie et de force.<sup>1</sup>

This is illustrated admirably in a "propos" whose main theme is that experience is more valuable than meditation, that only when in action can man prove himself. The final sentence forcefully drives home this idea, precisely in the manner outlined above: "Mais que l'esprit soit manuel, voilà toute l'affaire."<sup>2</sup>

These are just some of the many syntactical features of the "propos" which contribute to their informal, original and in some cases poetic style. Perhaps the most striking of Alain's stylistic features is his fondness for repetition. This reveals itself in his frequent use of alliteration, binary and ternary clauses, word pairs and words in groups of three. The fact that Alain once wrote, "L'allitération fut vraisemblablement la première pensée,"<sup>3</sup> shows the importance he attached to it. Much of the repetition in the "propos" is dictated purely by sound effect; by chance lexical and alliterative dictates rather than by logical ones. Reading Alain, one often has the feeling that one word literally conjures up another, that before writing a sentence he has no idea how it will end; the words take the initiative, often leading him on to new images and new

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1. H.P., p. 70.

2. Min., p. 266 (Propos I, p. 1075).

3. P.L., p. 28 (Propos II, p. 702).



ideas. The following sentence illustrates this well: "Nous nous vantons d'avoir surmonté toute majesté, tout fanatisme, toute religion; et nous sommes écrasés et pilés comme des sauvages par le pouvoir le plus absolu peut-être qu'on ait vu sur la planète."<sup>1</sup> The rhythmic group of three nouns in the first part of the sentence prepares the way for the word pair formed by the two past participles "écrasés" and "pilés", and this effect is itself reinforced by the alliteration contained in the repetition of the plosive 'p' sound in the final clause: "... le pouvoir le plus absolu peut-être qu'on ait vu sur la planète". This alliteration conveys the remorselessness of the action suggested in the previous word pair; we are not only "crushed" but "ground into powder". The word "pilés" does more than echo the past participle which precedes it, it continues the image suggested in "écrasés" and makes it more concrete. A similar example occurs when Alain writes, stressing the need for one term of a comparison to be rooted in external reality:

Aussi n'y a-t-il rien de plus plat que de vouloir expliquer une chose par une autre qui seulement lui ressemble; mais il faut toujours qu'une des deux étant instable, l'autre soit au contraire engagée et même encastrée dans la nécessité extérieure.<sup>2</sup>

Here the term "engagée" is reinforced by the more visually suggestive "encastrée" which follows it up. When Alain uses word pairs it is generally the case, as in these examples, that his thought progresses and does not merely turn back on itself and echo the previous idea. "Paremnasia"<sup>3</sup> is the term given to the stylistic effect achieved when the two words in a pair have different meanings but sound very similar. These word pairs can take various forms. In them we find identical prefixes or suffixes,

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1. S.E., p. 35 (Propos I, p. 991).

2. P.Est., pp. 198-99 (Propos I, pp. 604-05).

3. R.A. Sayce, "The style of Montaigne," Literary Style: a Symposium, ed. Seymour Chatman (1971), p. 388.

or identical endings as in the two past participles "écrasés" and "pilés" in the above example; the beginning and end of the words are sometimes phonetically identical, or sometimes the words are united by simple alliteration. The following sentence offers a good example of paronomasia. The slight differentiation of sound which occurs in the last two nouns confirms a significant difference of idea. Advocating a receptive rather than a critical attitude on the part of the reader, Alain writes:

... le pouvoir de communiquer prend du champ et de l'élan;  
il me traverse comme un boulet. Je n'ai pas le temps de  
me mettre en défense, ni en défiance ...<sup>1</sup>

With this next word pair, similarly, it is the sound rather than the meaning of the first word which evokes the second and again we witness a progression of thought in the second of the two words:

Il y a des siècles que la grande comédie trouve grâce  
partout; c'est qu'elle ose tout et dépose tout.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes, as in the following example, the second word of the pair contradicts the first:

... chacun se bouche les yeux plutôt que de renoncer à  
une erreur, adorée ou abhorrée ...<sup>3</sup>

In cases such as this one, when duplication results from a contrasting idea, Alain shows his capacity to see every question from two points of view at once. Further examples of Alain's fondness for contradiction are to be found in his use of oxymoron, the figure which results when, as in the following example, a noun is qualified by an adjective with which it is logically incompatible. Such a juxtaposition can have considerable expressive force. Speaking of the aspirations of the younger generation of intellectuals, anxious to dispel every element of mystery from the

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1. P.L., p. 36 (Propos I, p. 356).
  2. S.E., p. 35 (Propos I, p. 991).
  3. S.E., p. 270 (Propos I, p. 940).



world and to reduce everything to mathematical formulas, he writes, "... on veut des énigmes claires ..." <sup>1</sup> and proceeds to qualify this startling juxtaposition: "... j'entends développables, c'est-à-dire mathématiciennes." A similar example of oxymoron occurs when Alain is discussing the value of culture and the need to respect the great classics of literature: "Aussi, par mépris des Anciens, nous serons réduits à ce chaos d'idées claires." <sup>2</sup> By assimilating "chaos" with "clarity" he reminds the reader of his preference for "metaphysical obscurity" as opposed to "premature clarity", and of his scorn for many modern developments which have caused a cloud to be cast over traditional culture. He achieves a similar effect of surprise through syllepsis, the placing of a single word in the same grammatical relation to two others in different senses. Talking of hypocrisy in social relationships, he writes:

J'ai remarqué un jour le sourire d'une marchande de parfumerie; elle le ferma tout net comme elle ferma sa porte. <sup>3</sup>

A further example, also playing on the verb "fermer", and this time of particularly humorous effect, reads:

Les bureaux sont fermés à quatre heures, mais les bureaucrates sont fermés toute la journée. <sup>4</sup>

Similarly, but in more serious vein, Alain writes, when commenting on the dangers facing an idle mind:

Il ne faut point oublier cette fonction d'intelligence qui fait des passions si elle ne fait des portes. <sup>5</sup>

Alain's fondness for repetition is reflected not only in his use of word pairs, but also in patterns of clauses which are binary and ternary.

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1. P.L., p. 17 (Propos I, p. 742).

2. P.L., p. 70.

3. P.B., p. 72 (Propos I, p. 445).

4. E.D.R., p. 41.

5. P.B., p. 125 (Propos I, p. 429).

A general statement of a sweeping nature is often followed up by one or two clauses which qualify and sometimes contradict it by commenting on one of the key words used. The following statement is a good example of this feature of Alain's style:

Il y a autant d'esprit dans l'empirisme que dans n'importe quel système; seulement l'esprit n'est pas dans le système; l'esprit s'en retire à mesure qu'il le fait.<sup>1</sup>

The paradoxical nature of the first clause is evident to anyone acquainted with Alain's mistrust of systems of thought. Anticipating the reader's reaction to the paradox, Alain contradicts the first clause in the one following it, and the third draws the first two together by explaining the paradox inherent in the first. The use of semi-colons in these patterns of clauses is a constant feature of Alain's style. It reflects his dislike of the logical progression generally associated with long sentences and his preference for the juxtaposition of ideas as they come to mind. Another example, taken from the same "propos", illustrates the use of the binary pattern:

La police est comme la matière, sans âme aucune; et gare à vous si vous marchez sur les pieds du policeman. Vainement vous essaieriez de lui prouver que vous êtes de même opinion que lui; il n'a pas d'opinion il a des pieds.<sup>2</sup>

In each of these sentences the second clause is a light-hearted qualification of the first and the two sentences are themselves formed into a binary pattern in the very last clause. In it, by using the "opinion" of the second sentence and the "pieds" of the other as predicates of the same verb ("il n'a pas d'opinion il a des pieds"), Alain qualifies the first clause of the two sentences in a very subtle and amusing way. The concrete noun "pieds" here refers back to the abstract "matière" of the first sentence, and, lending to the symmetry of the whole, "opinion" refers

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1. Propos II, p. 981.

2. Ibid.

back to "one". To quote more examples of Alain's use of these patterns of clauses within sentences would be tedious. Their function, along with that of his word pairs and words in groups of three, is manifold. Apart from allowing Alain's poetic, analogy-perceiving mind scope to build up images as they come to mind, these various forms of repetition sometimes betray what could be termed the pedagogic ramming home of a point in a pleasing and memorable way. Alain, as we have seen, prefers to do this not by indulging in persuasive argument but by playing on the reader's aesthetic sense, combining a search for a more telling word with a concern for verbal balance and assonance.

Commenting on Montaigne's frequent repetition in the *Essays*, one critic claims that it is "an 'essay' of thought which we see in these various repetitions".<sup>1</sup> In similar fashion Alain could be said, as has already been suggested, to be trying out his thought in the "propos", faithful to his own belief as to what constitutes "true thought": "... la vraie pensée suppose et essai sans se lier jamais ..."<sup>2</sup> Talking of the "propos" in particular, he once wrote that they led him to "try out ideas".<sup>3</sup> If Alain gives us a faithful picture of his own effort at self-expression by not scoring out, his effort is certainly a much less painstaking one than that of Péguy. When Alain uses repetition in the "propos" we generally witness a progression of thought and not merely, as is the case with Péguy when he builds up strings of synonyms, thought turning back on itself. Alain could never have written a sentence like the following one, taken from one of Péguy's prose works:

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1. S. Chatman, "The style of Montaigne" (discussion of Sayce's paper), in *Literary Style: a Symposium* (1971), ed. S. Chatman, p. 404.

2. *S.B.A.*, p. 445.

3. *H.P.*, p. 165.



C'est une hérésie particulièrement et comme chrétiennement tentante, (particulièrement) chrétiennement tentante, éminemment chrétiennement tentante, parce que touchant, ayant touché à l'humilité, elle en a, elle en a gardé un goût chrétien, un goût profondément chrétien.<sup>1</sup>

The repetition here appears to mark no progression in Féguy's thought and has a purely oratorical effect. We know that Alain did not admire Féguy's prose style and in the next chapter the reasons for this will be examined more closely.<sup>2</sup> Of his own habit of saving what he calls "the natural movements of thought", and of the beneficial effects this has on his style, Alain writes:

Aussi une des règles les plus cachées de l'art d'écrire est de ne point trop effacer, bien plutôt de sauver les mouvements naturels, les surprises, les trouvailles, enfin de continuer toujours ce que le corps propose, l'esprit suivant et sauvant la nature.<sup>3</sup>

In the words "l'esprit suivant et sauvant la nature", Alain makes the paradox of the natural achieved through art more explicit. "Nature" is "followed" only up to a certain point and is then "saved" when subjected to critical control. This same paradox was found to lie at the heart of Alain's thinking on the subject of poetic language when we saw that, for him, "natural" language is in fact the natural reinstated by the intelligence through the artist's craft.

### 3. Imagery in the "Propos"

The repetition so frequent in the "propos" is often the result of Alain's tendency to replace an abstract term by a more concrete one which evokes a response of the senses and does not appeal to the intellect alone.

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1. C. Féguy, Véronique: Dialogue de l'Histoire et de l'Âme Charnelle, Œuvres en Prose (1957), p. 398.

2. See below, p. 153.

3. P.Est., p. 196 (Propos I, p. 596).

Alain's own comments on the nature of imagery, and on metaphor in particular, suggest from what perspective this aspect of his style can be most profitably approached. His belief that "la métaphore est faible si elle convient trop; il y faut de l'aventure",<sup>1</sup> serves as a fitting introduction to a study of this feature of his style. A good writer, in his opinion, does not merely point to an obvious similarity between phenomena, but uses "bold" metaphors, "de hardies métaphores qui sont trop loin de la chose",<sup>2</sup> and he quotes as examples "le pâtre promontoire" and "ce toit tranquille". It was the condensed, elliptical imagery and the striking juxtaposition of terms such as we find here which Alain most admired and probably strove to emulate.

The fact that Alain writes in prose, and the above examples are taken from verse, suggests that he was anxious to import into prose some stylistic features more commonly associated with poetry. His preference for implicit imagery of this type to the more explicit imagery generally associated with the comparatively leisurely movement of prose, leads one to conjecture that he has perhaps more in common with poets than with prose writers. The difference between implicit and explicit imagery corresponds to the distinction between simile and metaphor. A comparison of the expressive force of the same image, occurring in verse in the form of a metaphor and in prose in the form of a simile, suggests that the density and concentration of its poetic formulation makes for much greater impact.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that, illustrating the extreme form of condensed and elliptical imagery, the "maximum" metaphor found in the abrupt juxtaposition of two nouns, the first of which is a metaphorical

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1. P.Sat., p. 196 (Propos I, p. 596).

2. P.L., p. 31 (Propos II, p. 687).

3. S. Ullmann, Language and Style (1966), pp. 180-1.

equivalent of the second, Stephen Ullmann quotes Hugo's "pêtre pronon-toire" so admired by Alain.<sup>1</sup> Although Alain himself uses both simile and metaphor his most striking and memorable images are undoubtedly of the implicit type. His notion of "bold metaphors" can be compared to Richard Sayce's concept of "wide-angled" images.<sup>2</sup> Commenting on Balzac's tendency to suddenly juxtapose utterly disparate objects, like a civilized town and a barren waste, this critic describes the "angle" of Balzac's images as being often very wide.<sup>3</sup>

Many of Alain's images take the form of the close association of an abstract with a concrete noun. Discussing how the imagination can affect one's vision, Alain takes as an example a drop of water on the window-pane which appears to make the world on the other side tremble. The "goutte d'eau" becomes in a later sentence a "goutte d'humeur qui a roulé sur la vitre".<sup>4</sup> This unusual association of ideas strikingly conveys the fact that it is the imagination which is responsible for this momentary deformation of reality. In the following extract also the expression "la buée des passions" is a very unusual juxtaposition of terms:

Au sujet de l'avenir qui se fait, comme orage ou éclipse, il ne sert à rien d'espérer, il faut savoir, et observer avec les yeux secs. Comme on essuie les verres de la lunette ainsi il faut essuyer la buée des passions sur les yeux.<sup>5</sup>

This striking image included within the final simile lends force to what would otherwise be a fairly conventional comparison. Elsewhere Alain talks of the "buée sonore"<sup>6</sup> of the Easter bells, which, together with the

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1. S. Ullmann, Language and Style (1966), p. 161.

2. R.A. Sayce, Style in French Prose (1953), p. 67.

3. Ibid., pp. 62-3.

4. P.L., pp. 44-5 (Propos I, p. 931).

5. P.B., p. 173 (Propos I, p. 145).

6. P.Met., p. 46.

"bavures de bruit"<sup>1</sup> of the bad musician later in the same "propos", makes for very original synaesthetic imagery.

Another tendency of Alain's is to juxtapose common abstract nouns and rare adjectives of relatively circumscribed application. He talks for example of a "vertebral prejudice"<sup>2</sup> and of "anthropophagous reasons".<sup>3</sup> This last-quoted expression is anticipated by "savage reasons", which occurs earlier in the same sentence, and one can only surmise that the choice of "anthropophagous" when "cannibalistic" could have conveyed the same meaning, and the placing of it before a noun of much shorter length and one moreover which it logically cannot qualify, constitute an attempt to shock and amuse the reader.

His frequent use of verbal images to describe the active role of perception offers another example of Alain's original use of language. He writes, for example, "... la plus libre pensée est de mordre; car de céder à l'objet, il n'en est point question ..." <sup>4</sup> Similarly, describing a morning awakening, he says, "J'ouvre les volets. Le monde du dehors vient sur moi; aussitôt je le renvoie; l'attention mord comme un acide ..." <sup>5</sup> The comparison of complete wakefulness to a corrosive acid once again conveys Alain's underlying thought in striking fashion. He uses a different but equally effective image to stress that the mind should never be idle: "... il fallait quelque effet de réflexion là-dessus, car la pensée ne chôme jamais ..." <sup>6</sup>

Most of the above examples are simple, isolated images but therefore

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1. P.Est., p. 46.

2. P.L., p. 64.

3. id., p. 160 (Propos II, p. 980): "anthropophages raisons".

4. P.L., p. 9 (Propos II, p. 563).

5. P.L., p. 127 (Propos II, p. 619).

6. S.E., p. 36 (Propos II, p. 812).

also numerous examples in the "propos" of images which are developed in various ways. Their development can be either static or dynamic. It is static when the writer dwells on an analogy, elaborating its various aspects but remaining all the time within the range of a single image; it is dynamic, however, when he transcends the original analogy by adding variations on the same theme.<sup>1</sup> In the following example the opening simile evokes a very unusual metaphor: a syllable is compared to a clod of earth and although the image develops, it remains static. Those who spell out to themselves each syllable as they read are described thus: "... ils lisent comme on bêche, une motte de terre après l'autre; et tout l'esprit est au tranchant de la pelle."<sup>2</sup> Behind this image lies a criticism of those who are so lost in the details of what they are reading that the overall impact of the work escapes them. It is the initial contact of the mind with the sentence, "le tranchant de la pelle", which is important, but when the mind digs too deep, this impact is lost. In a "propos" inspired by the sight of imminent death, Alain uses a fairly conventional image, that of the train, or path, of one's thoughts, but he infuses new life into it with his accumulation of concrete verbs following the final abstract noun:

Pourquoi cette chose humaine n'est-elle pas morte? Elle aime encore la vie pourtant; elle se chauffe au soleil; elle ne veut pas mourir. Sur chemin pour nos pensées; la réflexion souvent y trébuche, se blesse, s'irrite, se jette dans un mauvais sentier.<sup>3</sup>

Here we can see the image gathering impetus as Alain's thought develops; reflection "stumbles" and "injures itself" on the pathway and finally takes the wrong turning. The image is continued into the next paragraph when he tells of his careful and "groping" search for the right road. Many of

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1. S. Ullmann, Language and Style (1966), p. 182.

2. P.Ed., p. 150 (Propos II, p. 722).

3. P.B., p. 130.

Alain's metaphors appear to be fortuitous in their development. In the following sentence he is comparing a sand-dune to a carpet outspread before the ocean:

Cette rencontre était sur la dune, merveilleux tapis, à la bordure des rochers noirs, devant le seigneur Océan.<sup>1</sup>

After "merveilleux tapis" an adjective is needed to qualify "Océan" for reasons of symmetry and the word "seigneur" completes both the image and the rhythm.

Turning now to cases in which Alain transcends the original analogy by adding variations on the same theme, the paragraph quoted below shows a particularly striking sustained image at work:

Mais, dit l'homme triste, s'il a lu Spinoza, je ne puis toujours pas être gai si je suis triste; cela dépend de mes humeurs, de ma fatigue, de mon âge et du temps qu'il fait." Bon. Dites-vous cela à vous-même, dites-vous sérieusement cela; renvoyez la tristesse à ses vraies causes; il me semble que vos lourdes pensées seront chassées par là, comme des nuages par le vent. La terre sera chargée de maux, mais le ciel sera clair; c'est toujours autant de gagné; vous aurez renvoyé la tristesse dans le corps; vos pensées en seront comme nettoyées. Ou disons, si vous voulez, que la pensée donne des ailes à la tristesse et en fait un chagrin planant; tandis que par ma réflexion, si elle vise bien, je casse les ailes, et je n'ai plus qu'un chagrin rampant. Il est toujours devant mes pieds, mais il n'est plus devant mes yeux. Seulement, voilà le diable, nous voulons toujours un chagrin qui vole bien haut.<sup>2</sup>

Here we see how Alain's images are integrated into his thought. We witness his ideas developing when he writes, "Ou disons, si vous voulez," conscious that his thought is assuming an even more figurative form. This image of winged sadness aptly conveys his belief that human suffering is only intensified if the mind dwells on it at length. If, however, it is "brought down to earth", a sense of proportion can be re-established. The original analogy in which "heavy thoughts" — in itself a figurative

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1. *P.Est.*, p. 242.

2. *P.B.*, p. 147 (*Propos I*, pp. 121-2).



expression for sadness — are likened to clouds, is a conventional one, but it is transcended when the cloud becomes a bird which will come tumbling down to earth if its wings, the cause of the soaring flights of grief, are broken by man's effort of reflection. It will no longer "fly" before his eyes, but "crawl" in front of his feet. The final image is a reminder of Alain's distrust of the imagination untempered by judgement and reflection. Another dynamic image occurs when perception and action are compared to sluice-gates: "Or, quand ces deux vannes, perception et action, sont ouvertes, un fleuve de vie porte le cœur de l'homme comme une plume légère."<sup>1</sup> The opening comparison here, a very striking and original one, leads on to the more conventional image of "the river of life" and this in its turn gives rise to a new analogy, a man's heart is compared to a light feather floating on the water. But the image is not yet finished. The next sentence, with its reference to "perception and action", rounds it off with one more variation on the theme: "Jouer au bridge, c'est faire couler la vie de la perception à l'action."

The following passage, together with the foregoing discussion, suggests that we can, with justification, talk of the poetry of the "propos":

Toutefois ce n'est guère que dans la géométrie que l'on dit ainsi seulement ce que l'on dit. Au lieu que le propre du poète est de faire surgir, soit par le mètre, soit par la rime, un mot inattendu et dont il faudra s'arranger; ce qu'à la fois remue un grand nombre de mots et réveille l'entendement, bien en peine de ces hardiesses, pour ne pas dire témérités; et ces témérités, quand elles détournent le sens, sont du moins des fruits de nature, et très exactement témoins de ce que peut le langage quand on le remue jusqu'au fond. Il suffit de réfléchir un moment pour comprendre que c'est par ce mouvement et remous des mots qu'on écrit même en prose.<sup>2</sup>

Alain alludes here to the writer's task of awakening the reader's mind by "stirring up language". This, we have already seen, he himself is capable

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1. P.B., p. 112 (Propos II, pp. 164-5).

2. P.Est., p. 268 (Propos II, p. 1056).



of doing, but he is trying to get beyond this stage and to enable the reader to glimpse reality in the way that the poetic mind, less hampered by conceptual apparatus, can.

No study of the style and imagery of the "propos" would be complete without special mention being made of the collection entitled Les Saisons de l'Esprit, for these "propos", which Alain chose to call "sommaires poèmes", he acknowledged to be the best he ever wrote. Of their content he goes on to say in the same dedication, "En ce recueil, toutes les écorces tombent, le lecteur voit bien ce qui retient mon regard. C'est un homme occupé à son métier d'homme."<sup>1</sup> Each "propos" is inspired by reflections on the passing seasons and the ever-changing nature of natural phenomena, a subject which gives rise to a wealth of descriptive, lyrical passages, and which at the same time gives Alain the philosopher ample room to comment on the will of man which alone is constant. He continues in the dedication, "Que voulais-je donc encore dire? Que tous les 'propos' sont à la fois de volonté et sur la volonté...", concluding with another direct comment on the poetry of the "propos" which manifests itself in his "inspired prose": "Je veux dire qu'il n'y a pas plus de facilité dans la prose inspirée que dans les vers eux-mêmes. La force poétique appartient à ces deux formes ..." The poetic quality of this particular collection of "propos" is alluded to by Alain in another dedication: "C'est la poésie qui est ici célébrée directement, par une imitation systématique de ses puissants procédés, qui communique à la prose un mouvement de navire."<sup>2</sup>

One does not have to read far to see what he means, for long rhythmic passages, sporting many examples of alliteration, abound on every

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1. Les Saisons de l'Esprit, N.R.F., édition originale. Exemplaire de Mme. Morre-Lambelin (déd. 6 déc. 1937).

2. Déd. à Maurice Savin (28 nov. 1937), cit. Propos I, p. xxxix.

page. A "propos" entitled "L'Océan Instituteur" where Alain speaks of the sea as being symbolic of the changing fortunes of life, opens with a paragraph of pure description whose final sentence, if it can so be called, reads more like a line of poetry:

En ce point de la côte, la mer n'a pas usé le rivage par de grandes plages entre deux bords de schiste; mais la terre nourricière se trouve tranchée comme à la bêche par de profondes entailles, et séparée en îlots grands comme des maisons, chacun élevant au niveau des moissons une table de terre fertile, ornée des mêmes plantes que le rivage. Vu de loin la frange verte semble continue; de plus près on découvre ces grandes coupures qu'on dirait d'hier. Les champs de blé et de betteraves et les petits murs courants conduisent l'œil jusqu'aux bosquets d'arbres tordus, indicateurs du vent, où les toits se montrent. Au bas c'est un autre monde, de rues tour- nantes entre des maisons de roc, d'ouvertures découpées sur une mer d'azul, violemment bleue. Ces couleurs sont comme pavées d'un sable rose, humide et ferme, sans un galet, le plus beau que j'ai vu. Ici tout est brassé, lavé, séparé. Couleurs pures, ombres dures.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is remarkable for the images and alliteration it contains.

The "notches" on the coast-line look as if they have been formed by a giant spade and now resemble tiny islands the size of houses which offer the harvest a "table of fertile ground". All these images are reflections of man's imprint on nature, and the "spade", "houses" and "table" portray his progressive conquest of this coastal area. These images are reinforced by alliteration: in the phrase "la terre nourricière se trouve tranchée" the repetition of the hard 'r' and 't' sounds suggests the remorseless digging action of the spade and later in the sentence the same sounds are repeated in "une table de terre fertile". This alliteration and the theme of the nourishing earth, which becomes a "table of fertile soil" preparing for the fruits of the harvest, connect these two images. Later in the passage the alliteration contained in "murs courants conduisent" accelerates the sentence and suggests the movement of the eye running down over the fields. The sentence "Ici tout est brassé, lavé, séparé" is a

1. *I.B.*, p. 148 (*Propos* I, pp. 723-4).

good example of secondary onomatopœia. The impression of cleanliness and purity which these words convey is reinforced by the accumulation of hard 's' sounds and by the alliteration contained in the final line: "Couleurs pures, ombres dures." The fact that this sentence has no verb emphasises the purely visual, descriptive nature of the passage, from which all action is absent. Another verbless sentence, sounding more like a line taken from a poem, occurs in a "propos" where Alain is discussing Easter and the crucifixion; he writes:

Mais l'imagination serait en moi tout à fait morte si je n'arrivais pas à penser à ces mains percées, à ce poids du corps qui déchire les plaies, à cette honte d'un homme nu expirant aux yeux de tous. Par des clous, choses humaines; sur une croix, chose humaine, charpente. La nature verse vainement sa lumière d'or. Je pense aux hommes.<sup>1</sup>

By this remarkable use of alliteration and repetition, together with his play on the word "charpente", which can mean a basic structure or framework such as the cross represents, or a human skeleton, Alain presents his subject more dramatically than it is normally within the powers of prose to do.

Not even a brief glance at the poetry in this collection of "propos" would be complete without some quotation from "Le Rossignol", which is rich in imagery and lyrical passages. In the first paragraph the scene is set and the atmosphere conveyed in the striking image, "Été souffle son haleine de four ...," and from the oven-baked breath of summer we move on to the following:

Aux rares nuits tièdes de mai, après que la journée avait été bruyante des appels du loriot, du merle et du coucou, le silence occupait le dessous du bois, et l'air vibrail comme une cloche aux derniers bruits. Mais quand la voûte sonore reposait enfin sur ses noirs piliers, la voix du rossignol, comme un archet, heurtait la coupe nocturne et la faisait sonner toute. Depuis les hautes branches jusqu'aux racines enfoncées dans le sol sylvestre, tout était chant.<sup>2</sup>

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1. S.E., p. 52 (Propos I, p. 1007).
  2. S.E., p. 91 (Propos I, p. 262).



The slow movement of the first sentence with its long descriptive introduction fills the reader with expectancy and lends a dramatic quality to the nightingale's burst into song later in the passage. The forest night, "a sonorous vault resting on black pillars", later echoes the notes of its song and, in a very unusual image, the nightingale's voice is compared to a musician's bow and the forest is the instrument on which it plays.

If the general function of Alain's imagery is to make his thought more tangible, that of his most regularly recurring images is to express his philosophical ideas and aspirations. Alain's idea of philosophy was discussed in an earlier chapter, and it will be remembered that he was opposed to system-building and the practices of many philosophers who were bent on explaining and classifying the world according to their own theories. These methods to which he is opposed he describes in images suggestive of the state of solidity. Just as reality, which for Alain is fluid and intangible, cannot be held in the hollow of one's hand, in the same way it cannot be classified into rigid concepts:

L'immobile est trompeur, parce qu'on s'y fie. La coutume s'y attache et la coutume est prise pour le vrai. C'est ce qui fait croire que l'on peut serrer le vrai dans son esprit comme l'or dans une bourse. Mais c'est comme si l'on voulait prendre et garder dans le creux de sa main les brillantes couleurs de l'eau marine. Et au contraire, l'idée vivante, l'idée juste, c'est qu'il y a une vérité de changement, d'après laquelle le fluide est plus fidèle que le solide.<sup>1</sup>

In another "propos" he again points to the elusive, "fluid" nature of reality, claiming that rigid formulas can never capture what by nature "overflows". Indeed, too often ideas, far from being regarded as mere instruments, are treated as entities in themselves. Only if the idea remains "transparent" does it yield a true picture of the aspect of reality

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1. S.E., p. 79 (Propos I, pp. 714-5).

it is representing, but if through lazy mental habits it is allowed to "harden" and "thicken" it loses all value as an instrument:

Il faudrait mille exemples, et enfin une pratique constante de ce doute investigateur, pour arriver à comprendre que c'est ce doute même qui fait l'idée et la garde transparente. Et, faute de cet étrange refus d'être content de ses pensées l'idée se durcit et s'épaissit; on ne voit plus qu'elle; on ne voit plus le monde au travers.<sup>1</sup>

When the idea hardens into a formula the result is the scholastic philosophy which Alain grew to despise, and of which he once wrote, "... cette scolastique moderne dessèche quelquefois, et détourne même de revenir à la poésie."<sup>2</sup> A similar kind of imagery is used to describe system-building philosophers who are only concerned to patch up their crumbling constructions:

Tous sont assurés de leurs chères pensées. Après tant de siècles nous ne savons pas encore nous servir de l'esprit; c'est une arme dangereuse. Même le doute et la mequemie gardent de l'aigreur; il y manque un dessin de gaieté, et une sorte de hauteur sans aucun sérieux, qui contemple et défait le château de cartes. Mais quoi? Mathématiciens, physiciens, philosophes ont tous les yeux hors de la tête; au lieu d'ouvrir des passages, ils bouchent tous les trous. "Avec un sac de plâtre, disait le maçon, on fait tenir pour dix ans une maison qui branle." Ainsi, confondant les métiers, les penseurs plâtront et replâtront, au lieu de se fier à la partie croulante, qui est la bonne. Celui qui croit aux atomes, il ne pense plus l'atome. Les systèmes sont les tombeaux de l'esprit. ... Tout notre travail est de parer des trous d'air en des erreurs énormes et massives.<sup>3</sup>

The final adjective, "massives", if taken in the metaphorical sense, echoes the other architectural images and neatly rounds off the passage. Alain's conviction which inspired this comparison is that the main preoccupation of many scientists and thinkers is to patch up and reformulate their theories in order to avoid refutation, but that by doing this they are merely substituting dogmatism for science. Imagery of the same type occurs when educational methods which attach undue importance to the accumulation of

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1. V.M., p. 260 (Propos I, p. 87).

2. P.L., p. 22.

3. S.M., p. 34 (Propos I, p. 990).

ideas are under attack: "Je ne sais si ceux qui instruisent les enfants et les hommes ont assez réfléchi là-dessus. A les entendre on croirait que le principal est d'avoir des idées bien cimentées et bien lourdes à rompre."<sup>1</sup> This is reminiscent of an image quoted earlier; ideas, when allowed to "harden" and "thicken", lose all value as instruments.

Images frequently used by Alain when he is discussing the conditions of art are those derived from the opposing processes of natural growth on the one hand and human fabrication on the other. They can be classed as "vegetal" and "architectural" images. Alain held in extreme distaste all works which are composed to illustrate preconceived ideas. Criticising Voltaire and Chateaubriand's attempts at verse, he writes:

On peut tout mettre en vers, le jeu d'échecs, le bilboquet, les jardins; il n'y faut que de la patience. Mais les vrais vers, les beaux vers, veulent une sorte de patience aussi. Un beau poème mûrit lentement comme un fruit. Où est la différence? Peut-être comme d'un fruit naturel à un fruit en cire; car il faut de la patience pour fabriquer des fruits en cire.<sup>2</sup>

With this vegetal image he points to the ideal process behind the development of a work of art, one of slow ripening. Elsewhere, criticising the triviality of certain types of conversation, he uses the same image to describe the writer's art, developing it in a very unusual way:

... les idées poussent et fleurissent dans le recueillement; et la patience est sans doute la principale vertu de l'écrivain; il attend que les notions s'ordonnent après le premier tumulte, et qu'enfin les mots se détachent en grappes mûres; moment qu'il faut saisir au lieu de secouer l'arbre et de faire sa récolte par terre.<sup>3</sup>

This moment which the poet must "seize" is the one in which critical reaction to the suggestions of language is demanded. He must stop "following" nature and "save" it by critical intervention. Perhaps more striking still is Alain's eulogy of Chateaubriand's prose. He claims it to be as

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1. P.B., p. 189 (Propos II, p. 146).

2. P.L., p. 8 (Propos I, p. 910).

3. P.Est., p. 38 (Propos II, p. 244).

much a product of nature as a poem of Goethe's, adding, "Tous deux, par René et Werther, ensemencèrent le monde."<sup>1</sup> The combination here of a concrete verb followed by an abstract noun gives rise to a very unusual image. To illustrate the other side of the picture, Alain writes, using architectural imagery, in a "propos" which opens, "Le ciment armé ne donne rien de beau," : "... nos dramaturges ont d'abord une idée et des personnages; d'où ces tragédies en ciment armé."<sup>2</sup> The impression that it has been constructed should be absent from a successful work of art; thus Alain writes in praise of Mallarmé's method of translating poetry word for word from a foreign language without altering the word order, "On arrive d'abord à une sorte de mosaïque barbare; les morceaux sont mal joints; le ciment les assemble, mais ne les accorde point."<sup>3</sup> The image is continued into the next paragraph when Alain claims that it is the "magnetism" of the "stones" rather than any external organizing force which is responsible for the effect Mallarmé achieves: "Voici des substances juxtaposées, comme des pierres précieuses jointes seulement par la force du métal."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most frequently recurring of Alain's images are those which express in a vast variety of ways the conflict between the intellect and the emotions — what Alain describes as "l'humiliante division en nous".<sup>5</sup> The body he sees as the depository of the passions and as such describes it as a mere receptacle: a bag, packet, or envelope. A child, for example, like all those who have not learnt to master the animal in themselves, "porte toutes les passions dans son sac de peau".<sup>6</sup> Indeed,

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1. P.Est., p. 106 (Propos II, p. 899).

2. P.Est., p. 95 (Propos I, p. 276).

3. P.L., p. 57 (Propos II, p. 632).

4. Ibid.

5. P.L., p. 66.

6. P.Ed., p. 12 (Propos II, p. 862).



in typical fashion, Alain gives this image etymological support when commenting on the expression "se porter": "Comment vous portez-vous?" qui pense à cette forte expression: 'se porter' qui exprime si bien notre travail de tous les instants, ce paquet que nous ne pouvons point séparer de nous?"<sup>1</sup> Similarly, when claiming that alone freedom from the tyranny of the passions can lead to happiness, he writes, "Et l'homme qui crie et s'irrite la gorge est le même qui chentera; car chacun reçoit en héritage ce paquet de muscles tremblant et noué."<sup>2</sup> Mind and body must be reconciled, and he who, unlike the athlete, develops only his intellectual faculties is bringing about a dangerous imbalance: "L'animal a été oublié, et se venge par un désaccord entre l'enveloppe et le contenu, qui se sent dans la moindre parole."<sup>3</sup> The necessity of harmonising the intellectual and <sup>the</sup> non-intellectual, thoughts and passions, is a theme to which Alain frequently returns: "... la forme humaine est quelque chose que vous ne pouvez pas rompre; il faut penser dans ce sac de peau; il faut que ce sac de peau danse selon vos pensées ..." <sup>4</sup> And again, speaking in praise of Goethe who combines so admirably these two opposing spheres and sees the impossibility of a world of pure abstractions, he nevertheless says of Hegel:

Je suis loin de mépriser le merveilleux professeur, car il a vu aussi cela, que l'idée n'est idée qu'emprisonnée dans la nature, et visible seulement par les secousses qu'elle imprime au sac de peau. <sup>5</sup>

In this study of Alain's style I have concentrated on those features which reflect his concern to catch and hold the reader's attention; to

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1. P.L., p. 11 (Propos II, p. 778).
  2. P.B., p. 176 (Propos I, p. 349).
  3. P.Est., p. 194 (Propos I, p. 594).
  4. P.L., p. 51 (Propos II, p. 469).
  5. P.L., p. 154.

"hunt him down" and at the same time respect his liberty. In order to drive a point home, rather than indulge in persuasive argument, in the "donec", "parce que", "premièrement" and "deuxièmement"<sup>1</sup> which would be an insult to the reader and an encroachment on his liberty, Alain prefers to play on his aesthetic sense by using apt yet unusual imagery — what he calls "paradoxical and violent comparisons"<sup>2</sup> — and, of course, repetition. Discussing the conditions of good prose, Alain writes in a sentence which gives us the key to an understanding of his prose style:

... c'est bien nature qui fait toutes les pensées; mais nous ne le croyons point; alors nous nous ennuions à raisonner, et nous prouvons tout. Cette misère d'avocat tue la prose aussi; car nos raisonnements ne font rien à la nature ...<sup>3</sup>

The expressive equivalence between Alain's stylistic devices and his intellectual assumptions was mentioned fleetingly at the beginning of this chapter.<sup>4</sup> One critic was quoted as having said that only in the "propos" does the way in which Alain expresses himself correspond to his conception of mental life. The "propos" appear to reflect the rhythm of his own thoughts and to respect the unity which Alain feels exists between the mental and the physiological. The same critic, commenting on the effect the reading of the "propos" in the Pléiade edition had on him, compared Alain's thought to something physiological:

Alain respire en un perpétuel présent, mais cette succession des présents fait un temps qui, dans la suite des propos, nous devient enfin perceptible. C'est le temps du retour éternel, qui n'est pas celui de l'histoire, mais de la biologie, de la nature: temps de la vie où, à chaque instant, l'ordre éternel se fait présent. Cette pensée respire comme un corps. Et elle tourne sur elle-même comme la terre.<sup>5</sup>

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1. See above, p. 104.

2. See above, p. 111.

3. P.L., p. 30 (Propos I, p. 1178).

4. See above, p. 102.

5. G. Picon, Panorama de la Nouvelle Littérature Française (1960), pp. 27-28.

Alain's concern to respect the unity of consciousness, will and life by avoiding, as far as possible, using language in a way which suggests divisions, dualisms and categories, is, to my mind, admirably reflected in the "propos".

CHAPTER IV

## CHAPTER IV

### CRITERIA OF CRITICISM

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#### 1. A Poet's Criteria

Alain's theory of language and the insight into the art of writing which he gained from his personal experience as a writer, provide the key to an understanding of his conception of literary art and consequently of his criteria of criticism. We saw when considering various theories of metaphor that the idea of the creative writer as one who embellishes language, who "improves" on its raw state by employing elaborate figurative expressions and other decorative devices to make his ideas more palatable, was not shared by Alain. His preference is manifestly for those writers who are of his view that common language, in its unadorned simplicity, is an adequate vehicle for expression, whereas he scorns those who couch their thoughts in fine formulas or versify their ideas. One of the marks of Alain's appreciation of Stendhal was "ce langage sans ornement, que notre auteur recherchait toujours",<sup>1</sup> and in an article on Gobineau he stresses likewise "cette manière de dire qui est sans vêtement".<sup>2</sup>

A glance at Alain's use of some key literary terms such as "style", "poetry", "inspiration" and "composition" reinforces this notion that, in literary art, it is the way language is used, rather than any a priori theory or intentions on the part of the author, which is the essential factor. Taken from a chapter in Arce Balzac, the following passage, where some light is thrown on the notions of "style" and "poetry", is of capital

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1. St., p. 809.

2. "Gobineau romanesque," Hun., p. 83.

importance. Apologising for the abundant padding in Balzac's novels,

Alain writes:

... et il y a du remplissage dans les meilleurs auteurs; nul n'a du style tout le temps. Mais qu'est ce que le style? Là-dessus je veux dire ce que je sais, sans pouvoir rien prouver. Le style est la poésie dans la prose, je veux dire une manière d'exprimer que la pensée n'explique pas.<sup>1</sup>

Far from being restricted to a generic term of reference, the term "poetry" assumes much wider significance in Alain's writings. "Poetry" for him, as was suggested in an earlier chapter, is a property of language and it is the poet's task to exploit the potential of language and discover the "poetry" inherent in it: "... le langage enferme toute la poésie,"<sup>2</sup> Alain writes when discussing metaphor: and in an article on Rabelais he says, "Je disais autrefois d'un poète qu'il fait sonner le langage."<sup>3</sup> His task is to recharge language, to give fresh life to over-etched words and to awaken the reader from his mechanical acceptance of them. In a dedication to *Les Dieux*, commenting on the fact that all language soon loses its expressive force because people become accustomed to it, Alain writes, "Il faut faire sonner tout le langage, et alors toute la magie réelle se déploie, dont le vrai nom est poésie."<sup>4</sup> The setting in opposition in the above context of the words "express" and "explain", poetry being "une manière d'exprimer que la pensée n'explique pas", points to poetry as constituting a world of expression which cannot be penetrated by logical explanation. This same opposition is reminiscent of certain phenomenological analyses of the mode of expression of the aesthetic object:

1. A.B., p. 1013.

2. E.H.S., p. 144 (*Le roman* II, p. 547).

3. *Idem*, p. 3.

4. *Idem*, p. 111, <sup>AD</sup>/<sub>P</sub> 1111.



... exprimer, c'est pour cet objet en quelque sorte se transcender vers une signification qui n'est pas la signification explicite assignée à la représentation, mais une signification plus fondamentale qui projette un monde.<sup>1</sup>

Poetry, if it is an attempt not to represent the world but to "project" a world, will always remain impenetrable to the type of mind for whom the explicable, objectively knowable world alone exists. The essence of a poem can never be conveyed in a prose rendering of it as the prerogative of poetry is to satisfy other demands than those of the intellect alone.<sup>2</sup> If this view is commonplace the reasons why total paraphrase must remain impossible have rarely been expressed as forcefully as in the following lines:

It is precisely because this mystery, and a sense of infinite possibility, infinite potentiality, ultimate unsayability, must remain in an experience, that one must not be able to put one's finger on everything that a poem may express: paraphrase must remain impossible: just as in the real world, total paraphrase, total translation, total explanation of a phenomenon in all its details remains impossible ...<sup>3</sup>

The creative writer's task is therefore not to explain reality but to convey this "infinite potentiality" and "ultimate unsayability" of experience by using language in a way that disturbs all those who believe that, because they can fit reality into neat categories, no element of mystery is left.

But how near are we now to elucidating Alain's notion of style? It is "poetry in prose", it disturbs our expectations and is diametrically opposed to the language of logical explanation. Another remark, this time based on the etymology of the word, touches the mainspring of Alain's

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1. M. Dufrenne, Phénoménologie de l'Expérience Esthétique I (1967), p. 255.

2. This opposition of "express" and "explain" reflects Alain's division of language into "langage absolu", the affirmative, non-dialectical language of the arts, and "langage relatif", the language of explanation which pertains to the world of rational discourse.

3. G. Martin, Language, Truth and Poetry (1975), p. 269.



literary theory:

Enfin ce qui renvoie à un autre objet est plat; ce qui renvoie à la sagesse de l'auteur est pédant; mais quand l'œuvre répond à elle-même et instruit l'artiste aussi bien, elle est de style alors. Et ce n'est pas par hasard que ce beau mot désigne aussi l'outil pointu qui sculptait autrefois l'écriture.<sup>1</sup>

The vital factor in the act of literary creation is neither an external object of reference, nor the author's ideas, but the act of writing itself. An examination of other fundamental notions such as inspiration and composition corroborates this idea. Far from being a gift bestowed by the Muses, inspiration is for Alain the result of hard work and effort: "L'inspiration se montre dans le travail," he writes,<sup>2</sup> and his entire aesthetic theory bears out this remark. So great is the importance that Alain attaches to hard work and perseverance that the artist's craft becomes his "métier" and the creative writer himself is described as an "ouvrier" or "artisan".<sup>3</sup> Valéry's pre-eminence as a poet earns him the reputation of being, for Alain, "l'artisan de ce métier-là".<sup>4</sup> Whatever particular art Alain is discussing he always emphasises the importance of the "chemin du métier"<sup>5</sup> and the "moyen d'ouvrier",<sup>6</sup> for it is by virtue of the difficulties offered by the particular craft in which he is engaged that "l'artisan s'élève à l'art".<sup>7</sup> In an article entitled "Naissance de la poésie" Alain speaks of the difficulty of the rhyme leading to poetic inspiration:

... la rime qui fait sens et liaison et clarté, est un miracle continuuel. J'aime mieux l'accord de ce moyen grossier avec les

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1. S.B.A., p. 469.

2. A.B., p. 955.

3. Ibid., p. 956.

4. Dés.M.M.-L., <sup>A.D.</sup>/<sub>P.</sub> xxxiii.

5. V.L., p. 533.

6. A.B., p. 956.

7. V.L., p. 591.

raisons, que les raisons toutes seules. Et cela même ne définit pas mal l'inspiration poétique. L'homme qui n'a pas trouvé mieux qu'il ne pensait par la difficulté de la rime n'est nullement un poète.<sup>1</sup>

Here again we are reminded of Alain's own experience as a journalist which taught him to appreciate the beneficial effect of material conditions on the writer; the limited length of the "propos" which prevented him from developing his thoughts at length helped him to achieve style.<sup>2</sup> This conception of art where inspiration and style are the result of hard work and perseverance stems from Alain's denial of the existence of mental images: "C'est parce que l'imagination est incapable de créer dans l'esprit seulament, c'est pour cela qu'il y a des Beaux-Arts."<sup>3</sup> Activity alone can save men from falling prey to the idle fancies of his imagination when it is offered no means of externalisation: "Si le pouvoir d'exécuter n'allait pas beaucoup plus loin que le pouvoir de penser ou de rêver, il n'y aurait pas d'artistes,"<sup>4</sup> claims Alain, characteristically playing down abstract thought. Commenting on artists who are mistaken in their approach as they misunderstand the nature of imagination, he writes:

Voilà comment travailler est autre chose que penser. L'erreur propre aux artistes est de croire qu'ils trouveront mieux en méditant qu'en essayant; mais le métier et la nécessité les détournent d'une voie où il n'y a rien.<sup>5</sup>

If the artist is a craftsman with nothing to say, then it is natural that he should lay his trust in his medium rather than in his powers of mind and that improvisation should become his guiding rule. Of Stendhal,

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1. Marianne, 31/v/1939.

2. P.L., p. 58: "Le style rappelle l'instrument qui mordait sur la cire; (Propos I, ce qui laisse supposer que le style n'est pas surtout d'ess- p. 1175) prit. bien plutôt le style est l'inflexion imprimée aux idées par les conditions matérielles."

3. V.L., p. 607.

4. S.B.A., p. 238.

5. A.B., p. 955.

one of the masters of the art of improvisation, Alain wrote: "C'est la langue commune qu'il aime. ... C'est l'instrument qui permet d'improviser."<sup>1</sup> But if every writer did not have at his disposal the riches of his native tongue, this process would no doubt have less fortunate results. In an article on Gobineau, Alain comments further on this style which results from improvisation, "style qu'il faut appeler stendhalien",<sup>2</sup> when he writes, "Or rien n'est plus improvisé et en quelque sorte lancé que le style de Gobineau."<sup>3</sup> Although Alain's notion of literary art is sometimes suggestive of spontaneity and careless improvisation, he believes that what appears spontaneous in art has been developing in the artist's mind over a period of time. The view that a period of "maturation" or "incubation" precedes artistic creation is one which has gained widespread recognition. Opinions differ, however, as to the nature of the mind's activity during this period. Does it merely lie fallow, as the "rest hypothesis" holds, and emerge refreshed from this "totally blank period",<sup>4</sup> or is it involved in actual unconscious work during this period? Because of his belief that nothing, in whatever field of human activity, could be achieved by the unconscious mind alone — even to acknowledge its existence he considered a blow to human dignity — Alain favoured the rest hypothesis. In some passages he refers explicitly to the "repos" which is beneficial to the artist and thinker. In the following lines he compares the mind to a torch battery which becomes increasingly ineffective as a result of its own activity:

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1. St., p. 801. On page 806 he says of the Chartreuse de Parme, which was written in six weeks, that it "offre sans doute en sa perfection cette improvisation qui s'accroît d'elle-même, et qui craint de finir".
  2. Rum., p. 82.
  3. Ibid., p. 75.
  4. Christine M. Crow, Paul Valéry, Consciousness and Nature (1972), p. 186.



Les inventeurs sont de grands travailleurs; et les illuminations sont la récompense du travail. ... Mais il faut bien entendre le travail, qui est de compilation, de révision, d'entraînement, d'exercice, sans aucune volonté de penser. ... Ce n'est presque que la mémoire qui marche. Semblable à celui qui se meut la nuit dans un terrain difficile, et qui n'a qu'une faible lampe de poche; il ne la tient pas allumée; il ne la fait briller que quand il ne peut pas faire autrement. Je comparerais la pensée à une telle lampe, aussitôt ralentie par les produits même de son activité. Une pile se dégrasse lentement et s'encrasse vite. Ainsi, et encore plus, l'éclat de nos pensées ne dure guère, et suppose un long sommeil.<sup>1</sup>

In the same "propos" Alain rejects Poincaré's belief that the unconscious mind is capable of making active combinations of its own and can achieve results with material with which the conscious mind wrestled in vain:

... l'idée géniale vient toujours en un éclair quand elle vient; moins à force d'y penser qu'à force de n'y pas penser. Dont Poincaré le mathématicien a raconté un exemple; seulement il ne l'a pas bien interprété, supposant que l'esprit travaille en son repos et dans le dessous; en quoi il suivait la mode; au vrai toute invention suppose un esprit frais, et ainsi se fait du premier coup, ou nullement.<sup>2</sup>

We saw in an earlier chapter that Alain's interactionist view of mind-body states means that he refuses to give the unconscious mind the status of an entity with a will of its own.<sup>3</sup> It is on these grounds that he rejects Poincaré's hypothesis outlined above. The "rest hypothesis", which Alain himself supports in the case of artistic creation and scientific discovery, appears to me to be more in line with what we know today of mental unity, and therefore more plausible.

"Improvisation", then, is a word which occurs more frequently in Alain's account of the literary process than composition. Apparently the absence from his ystème des Beaux-Arts of any analysis of composition was greeted with considerable surprise: "Quelqu'un s'étonna de ne rien trouver en cet ouvrage qui concernât la composition."<sup>4</sup> But it is the

1. P.L., p. 94 (Propos I, pp. 1144-5).

2. P.L., p. 94 (Propos I, p. 1144).

3. See above, p. 42, and below, p. 169.

4. S.B.A. (notes added in 1926), A.D. p. xxx.

fault of traditional criticism, Alain claims, to over-stress this false criterion: "Il me semble que hors de ces nécessités extérieures," he writes, "la composition n'est jamais rien; car on ne peut nommer composition cet ordre de développement intérieur ... Le mot 'composition' par structure, refuse ce sens."<sup>1</sup> "Composition", he continues, is the prerogative of industry, not art: "la composition se rapporte à l'industrie, et désigne ce qui dans l'œuvre se conforme à une nécessité d'avance comprise, ou bien à un plan de raison."<sup>2</sup> Applying this rule to poetry, he concludes that the poet who "composes" will never succeed in his art:

Le poète aussi compose, en ce sens qu'il se donne d'avance un parcours, une carrière, une idée; c'est penser en prose et mettre ensuite cette prose en vers. Cette méthode n'a jamais fait un poème. Tous les vers plats sont faits ainsi.<sup>3</sup>

The poet should not work according to a preconceived rational scheme and merely versify his ideas, but must await what Alain calls "le miracle poétique" and "le bonheur d'expression".<sup>4</sup> The impression that it has been constructed according to a rational plan should be absent from a successful work of art. Alain, as we have already seen, praises Mallarmé's method of translating poetry word for word from English without altering the word order: "On arrive d'abord à une sorte de mosaïque barbare; les morceaux sont mal joints; le ciment les assemble, mais ne les accorde point."<sup>5</sup> The image is continued into the next paragraph when Alain claims it is the magnetism of the "stones" rather than any external organising force which is responsible for the effect that Mallarmé achieves: "Voici des substances juxtaposées, comme des pierres

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1. S.E.A. (notes added in 1926), A.D. p. xxxi.

2. Ibid.

3. S.E., p. 250 (Propos I, p. 1279).

4. V.L., p. 520.

5. P.L., p. 57 (Propos II, p. 632).

précieuses jointes seulement par la force du métal."<sup>1</sup> Just as improvisation replaces inspiration in Alain's scale of values, so execution replaces composition; the poet should not compose in his mind, but must work, like the painter, "brush in hand".<sup>2</sup> The following passage distinguishes the true poet from the versifier whose concern is to disguise his ideas in metrical form:

Ce qui est propre au poète, et ce qui le distingue d'abord de celui qui ajuste de la prose selon le mètre et la rime, c'est qu'au lieu d'aller de l'idée à l'expression, il va, tout au contraire, de l'expression à l'idée. Bien loin de chercher ses preuves, ses comparaisons, ses images, en vue d'éclairer ses pensées et de les faire descendre de l'abstrait où elles seraient nées, il ne cesse bien plutôt de tirer des sons de soi comme d'une flûte, descendant d'avance en ses vers, en ses strophes, en ses sonorités attendues, des mots qu'il ne connaît pas encore, des mots qu'il attend, et qui, après des refus, s'offriront comme à miracle pour accorder le son et le sens. Il faut comprendre qu'ici c'est la nature qui marche la première, et que l'harmonie des vers précède à leur sens.<sup>3</sup>

It is perhaps evident now that Alain's use of literary terms does not always correspond to traditional usage. In any attempt to elucidate his criteria of criticism, it is no more helpful to classify the works he discussed according to literary genres than it would be to follow the traditional pattern where inspiration precedes composition. Balzac and Stendhal are as much poets for Alain as are Valéry and Mallarmé, and this is because they achieve through original use of language a "poetic" turn of phrase. But of his ambiguous use of the term "poet" Alain was fully aware, as the following lines on Chateaubriand suggest:

Il a écrit une tragédie en vers, qui est ridicule, et des poèmes plats. On dira qu'il était meilleur poète en prose; mais c'est se moquer des mots.<sup>4</sup>

1. P.L., p. 57 (Propos II, p. 633).

2. A.B., pp. 954-5: "Il n'y a que les poètes qui font des vers sans bien savoir où ils vont. C'est méditer les broches à la main."

3. V.L., pp. 519-20.

4. P.L., p. 107 (Propos II, p. 900).



In fact, Alain uses the term "poet" to describe any writer who shares his conception of the literary act, and who does not attempt to reformulate his ideas in more elegant language or in rhyming couplets. L'Abbé Delille, who in "Les Jardins" purported to be writing poetry, achieved for this reason what Alain calls "la poésie sans poésie".<sup>1</sup> So if our starting point to a study of Alain's criteria of criticism cannot be the usually convenient division into literary genres, and if we are to agree with Alain when he writes that the general doctrine of all the arts, namely "l'explication par la matière",<sup>2</sup> should be applied to literature, then language itself, and the writer's attitude to it, must provide the key to the whole literary process.

Alain's notion of literary art lies behind one of his main criteria of criticism, that which is motivated by what could be called his "poetic" conscience, and which consists in finding a corresponding conscience and thence a corresponding idea of literary art, in the author in question. The following "propos", entitled "L'action d'écrire",<sup>3</sup> serves as a good introduction to Alain's criticism, and with the names of Balzac and Stendhal, Chateaubriand and Flaubert, the path to discussion lies open:

Je vois dans les Mémoires de Tolstoï qu'à vingt ans il connaissait déjà les deux choses qui importent pour la formation de l'esprit, c'est-à-dire un emploi du temps et un cahier. Les idées viendront ensuite, dit-il. L'action d'écrire me paraît la plus favorable de toutes pour régler nos folles pensées et leur donner consistance. La parole convient beaucoup moins; et surtout la conversation est directement contraire à l'examen réfléchi. Il faudrait prendre la conversation à peu près comme le catholique prend la messe. Ce n'est qu'un échange de signes connus et un exercice de politesse. Il n'y faut point chercher d'idées, et surtout il n'y en faut point

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1. P.L., p. 31 (Propos II, p. 687).

2. "Naissance de la poésie," Marianne, 31/v/1939: "Les traits de la littérature s'offrent en foule, dès qu'on la considère comme un des Beaux-Arts, et dès qu'on lui applique la doctrine générale des Beaux-Arts, c'est-à-dire l'explication par la matière."

3. P.L., pp. 144-5 (Propos II, pp. 459-60).



mettre. J'ai observé souvent que l'interlocuteur habille selon la politesse tout ce que vous lui proposez imprudemment; c'est sur un tel souvenir que vous travaillez, et bien vainement. La forme a scellé le contenu. En ces élégants résumés il n'y a plus que du style, ce qui n'est plus style. Gardez-vous des gens d'esprit; ils feront tenir en trois lignes l'avenir de vos pensées.

Je remarque que mes préférés, Stendhal et Balzac, passent l'un et l'autre pour n'avoir point de style; au contraire on en reconnaît en Flaubert, où je n'ai pas trouvé grand'chose. Au temps de Voltaire on jugeait communément qu'un petit temple dans le genre grec avait du style, et qu'une cathédrale gothique n'en avait point. Peut-être faut-il considérer les autres arts, et principalement ceux qui sont tout près d'un métier, pour comprendre que c'est le contenu ou la matière par la résistance même, qui fait la forme belle. Par exemple, en Salammbo, il apparaît que la forme détermine le contenu; la chose n'y est qu'ornement, sans aucune réalité. Au contraire, en un voyageur comme Chateaubriand, c'est l'objet même qui règle la forme; et, dans cet auteur, je trouve même l'exemple de deux manières, car il y a plus de style dans l'Itinéraire que dans les Martyrs; et ceux qui aiment Salammbo diront justement le contraire.

Me voilà bien loin du cahier de Tolstoï. Non pas si loin; car les pensées, en leur première confusion, sont un contenu aussi, et une matière résistante. Réfléchir sans projet, et en prenant l'écriture comme moyen, est une méthode pour vaincre le style. Il faut que l'expression soit trouvée, mais non point cherchée; et la plus petite trace de recherche dans la forme est laide. Dès que vous changez un mot pour plaire, cela se voit; forme creuse alors, comme l'étain repoussé. Qui ne préfère un broc d'étain sans ornement aucun? C'est que la matière alors détermine la forme; et il est vraisemblable que la belle forme des anciennes poteries résulte de cet équilibre qu'il faut trouver pour la matière encore plastique avant la cuisson. Ainsi il y a une forme pour la pensée de chacun, qu'il doit trouver, mais non point chercher. Quand l'écrivain trouve sa forme et se plaît à lui-même, c'est un beau moment et c'est le trait. Ce bonheur d'expression, comme on dit si bien, est, comme tout bonheur, un effet et non une fin. Quand une ville est belle, elle est plus belle qu'un temple. Mais aussi un beau temple fut toujours bâti comme une ville, pour une fin qui n'était pas le beau.

This cursory dismissal of Flaubert, famous for style but in whose works Alain "did not find much", is an example of the way in which Alain arouses the reader by his use of shock statements inviting a reaction. It is also an immediate indication of the direction in which this criterion will lead us; those who are consciously looking for style, who are aiming at some ideal of artistic perfection, are doomed to failure, for "il faut que l'expression soit trouvée, mais non point cherchée." Alain does not dwell

on Flaubert at length, but in several "propos" attacks him in the same sarcastic tones. He writes, for example:

Peut-être cet homme, qui voulut être seulement artiste, est-il séparé de la musique et même de tous les arts par quelque disgrâce naturelle. Il se peut que cette manière d'écrire, qui vise toujours à l'effet, et souvent y arrive, soit une forme sans contenu, comme ces corniches de plâtre, qui ne donnent qu'une apparence.<sup>1</sup>

Flaubert-lovers no doubt find that Chateaubriand achieves a better style in the Martyrs than in the Itinéraire, but for Alain it is the other way round. His favourite authors, Stendhal and Balzac (to each of whom he devotes a lengthy commentary), are usually considered, again in comparison with writers like Flaubert, to be lacking in style; but for Alain they provide, each in his characteristic way, examples of a perfect style; they each find as it were the "form for their thought" and achieve "le bonheur d'expression". A successful turn of phrase is frequently described by Alain as a "bonheur d'expression": in the Vingt Leçons he writes:

... tout se passe comme si l'artiste poursuivait une certaine fin, mais pourtant il ne la connaît qu'après qu'il l'a réalisée, étant lui-même spectateur de son œuvre, et le premier surpris. Ce qu'on nomme le bonheur d'expression signifie cela même.<sup>2</sup>

This term runs like a leitmotiv throughout Alain's work; the importance he attaches to it is stressed when he talks of "le bonheur d'expression qui est la loi de toute expression".<sup>3</sup> The fact that Balzac and Stendhal achieve such different styles, as Alain himself acknowledges when he writes, "... je me prépare à combattre pour le style de Stendhal, et pour celui de Balzac aussi; car j'aime à l'idolâtrie ces deux écrivains, et, dans les deux, deux manières d'écrire ennemies l'une de l'autre,"<sup>4</sup> shows the

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1. P.L., pp. 122-3 (Propos II, p. 449).

2. V.L., p. 520.

3. E.S., p. 625, and V.L., p. 521: "... ce bonheur d'expression, si bien nommé, c'est cela qui conduit le poète."

4. A.B., p. 1009.



wide-ranging application of Alain's criterion. Although it manifests itself in different ways, a consciousness of the potential of language, together with the ability to achieve "le bonheur d'expression", characterises the works of both Stendhal and Balzac. The essential difference in their writing methods is that, while they both believe in never scoring out a word once it is down on paper,<sup>1</sup> Stendhal never adds finishing touches or expands on what he has written, a habit which is a feature of Balzac's style. In the Système des Beaux-Arts Alain explains why, in his opinion, a good prose writer never scores out: "La rature exprime toujours le travail d'industrie, qui compare l'exécution à l'idée;" and he adds, comparing his notion of "la prose artiste" to that of "la prose industrielle": "La prose artiste ne rature donc point, mais plutôt retoucherait seulement en ajoutant, et d'après ce qui est fait," as does Balzac, "grand architecte de la prose".<sup>2</sup> Alain sums up the difference between these two styles with the words, "... la force de Balzac était dans le mécontentement; celle de Stendhal dans l'indifférence. Mais aussi faut-il dire que le style trouvé par Stendhal a moins de mordant que les formules où Balzac dépasse enfin ce qu'il cherchait."<sup>3</sup> Commenting on some of Balzac's more successful passages, Alain writes, "... ce sont des sommets, mais qui donnent raison aux mouvements de terrain: je veux dire que ces réussites éclairent bien d'autres essais, et tout l'effort d'écrire."<sup>4</sup> The following extract illustrates some of these summits:

J'ai recueilli d'autres exemples que j'aime de longtemps, et que de loin je pressens quand je relis, averti peut-être par un désespoir de l'expression. Dans Le Lys, la scène des vendanges, qui

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1. A.B., p. 1010: "Stendhal ne rature pas au lieu que Balzac développe sur épreuves."
  2. S.B.A., pp. 465-6.
  3. A.B., p. 1014.
  4. A.B., p. 1016.

marque le sommet des pures amours, nous jette aussi un trait de style, et bien inattendu ... "Puis je me mis à cueillir des grappes, à remplir mon panier, à l'aller vider dans le tonneau de vendange avec une application corporelle, silencieuse, et soutenue, par une marche lente et mesurée qui laissa mon âme libre. Je goûtai l'ineffable plaisir d'un travail extérieur qui voiture la vie en réglant le cours de la passion, bien près, sans ce mouvement mécanique, de tout incendier." L'idée est importante, mais elle résiste d'abord à l'écriture. Je vois deux fautes dans la première phrase ... Mais dans la reprise: "Je goûtai, etc." l'expression prend le devant, figurant l'idée par cela même et ainsi doublement. "Voiturer la vie" est une expression inspirée, et comme une chute de mots penchés en avant de l'idée. Une grande partie de l'art d'écrire est de ne pas retoucher ces effets de nature.

Deux autres exemples seront pris de Béatrix ... Aux premières pages il décrit Guérande, et tout d'un coup s'attendrit et s'élève par une sorte de pressentiment du drame. "Parfois l'image de cette ville revient frapper au temple du souvenir; elle entre coiffée de ses tours, parée de sa ceinture; elle déploie sa robe semée de ses belles fleurs, secoue le manteau d'or de ses dunes, exhale les senteurs enivrantes de ses jolis chemins épineux et pleins de bouquets noués au hasard, etc." Ici, c'est le commencement qui enlève la suite; ce genre de mouvement est aussi étonnant que le sublime d'un poème. Plus loin dans le même roman un dialogue muet entre Calyste et sa mère. "Serai-je donc sans belles et folles amours?" Et ce regard de Calyste est commenté pendant une demi-page, déjà remarquable par l'éloquence et l'accumulation. Mais voici mieux: "La baronne vit toutes ces pensées plus claires, plus belles, plus vives que l'art ne les fait à celui qui les lit; elle les embrassa rapides, toutes jetées par le regard comme les flèches d'un carquois qui se renverse ..."<sup>1</sup>

However, between these "traits de style", these successful turns of phrase such as "voiturer la vie" and "frapper au temple du souvenir", there is in Balzac much padding and many digressions, and it is this aspect of his style which is best known and has often caused it to be misunderstood.

We saw earlier in this chapter that Alain recognises that digressions are a necessary ingredient of good literature and that they are to be found in the works of the best writers.<sup>2</sup> By seeing the positive side of boredom, Alain was anticipating the belief, held by some structuralist critics today, that digressions, and the boredom they cause, are necessary as they make the reader aware that his pleasure may depend on a variable rhythm

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1. A.B., pp. 1015-16.

2. See p. 136 above.



of reading.<sup>1</sup> In Stendhal, however, there are no meanderings, no preliminaries or long-winded sentences leading up to the "trait de style". His writings are characterised by "cette phrase courte et bourrée de sens",<sup>2</sup> and his "style nu",<sup>3</sup> absolutely without ornament, modelled on the style of the Code Civil,<sup>4</sup> boasts some perfect examples of "le bonheur d'expression", on only one of which the following "propos" comments at length:

Stendhal écrit que la belle Mathilde s'ennuyait en espoir. Cette sorte de choc m'a laissé d'abord étourdi d'admiration. Cela sonnait vrai. Le personnage, ainsi couronné, entrait en ce bal; les rangs s'ouvraient; l'avenir s'ouvrait; les yeux de Mathilde m'étaient présents; j'aurais voulu lui plaire; j'aurais craint de lui plaire. Me voilà presque à toucher toutes les fautes que Julien fera. Le bonheur d'expression ne peut aller plus loin. Si l'art du romancier consistait à raconter, à décrire, à expliquer, n'importe qui serait romancier. J'en lis d'intrépides, et qui arriveront à l'ancienneté, comme dans les autres carrières; mais ils n'ont point de bonheur.

Un trait comme celui-là est proprement beau. Il promet le vrai; mais il n'explique rien; il me tourne vers l'avenir, à chaque fois de nouveau vers l'avenir ...<sup>5</sup>

The juxtaposition of the two terms "ennui" and "espoir", not common in ordinary linguistic usage, has an immediate effect on the perceptive reader and fills him with expectancy: "... je vais découvrir le secret de ce bijou si bien fermé; je cours avec Julien; je suis lui."<sup>6</sup> The degree of "bonheur d'expression" which Stendhal achieves provides a yardstick for Alain's discussion of his novels. Carefully stating that he does not prefer La Chartreuse to Le Rouge et le Noir, Alain admits that he finds less "bonheur" in the latter,<sup>7</sup> meaning that Stendhal was evidently

1. J. Culler, Structuralist Poetics (1975), pp. 262-3.
2. St., p. 812.
3. Ibid., p. 804.
4. Ibid., p. 801.
5. P.L., p. 110 (Propos II, p. 766).
6. P.L., p. 111 (Propos II, p. 767).
7. St., p. 808.

more at ease with La Chartreuse, which he wrote in six weeks in a state of happy abandonment.<sup>1</sup> In Lucien Leuwen, Stendhal's unfinished novel, there is "moins de bonheur"<sup>2</sup> than in the other two, and the reason is not far to seek, for the author himself admits "qu'il cherchait alors le style amusant; cela prouve déjà qu'il n'était pas emporté, comme dans La Chartreuse, par un de ces mouvements de nature qui se moquent bien du public. Il cherchait," and he who looks for style will never find it.

In an article on Rabelais, Alain pursues this idea of the writer's abandonment, but here in stronger terms; he talks of verbal inebriety as being the mark of the real writer: "... cet enivrement d'écrire est en tout écrivain;"<sup>3</sup> and again, "Un écrivain n'existe que par la présence, et mieux, l'afflux des paroles."<sup>4</sup> Although it might appear strange to speak of Stendhal and Rabelais in one breath, they both share the same attitude to language and derive their inspiration from the process of improvisation itself. The fact that this attitude manifests itself differently is easily explained if we situate Rabelais and Stendhal in the context of the evolution of the French language. Rabelais was writing when the language was still young and flexible and there was more room for verbal play and exuberance. As Alain says in his introductory paragraph, Rabelais is literally carried away by the extraordinary wealth of language:

Je me mets à lire tout ingénument. Je suis saisi par un tumulte de mots. Que signifie? On dirait que l'écrivain se plaît à faire entendre la langue. La variété, l'extraordinaire l'emportent. Il ne se soucie point du sens; un son en attire un autre; ce n'est point ressemblance qui les enchaîne, c'est plutôt différence, contraste. Il joue de la langue comme un musicien prélude, cherchant

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1. St., p. 806: "... les merveilles de Stendhal sont dans les morceaux où il s'abandonne à écrire, où c'est l'écrire même qui appelle les pensées ..."
  2. Ibid., pp. 83-14.
  3. Hum., p. 6.
  4. Ibid., p. 5.



la combinaison et se laissant conduire ... Cet auteur s'enivre de sa langue, il est ravi de cette abondance qui se montre.<sup>1</sup>

None of the writers so far discussed, neither Balzac nor Stendhal nor Rabelais, thinks of style nor aims at achieving it. As was the case with Saint-Simon, to whom Alain devotes a considerable article, their art was unconscious: "Ce travail est d'un artiste; mais Saint-Simon ne se savait pas artiste"<sup>2</sup> are words which could be applied equally well to all writers in whom Alain finds style. He quotes abundantly from Saint-Simon's Mémoires, delighting particularly in his portraits of some personalities of the day. The following extract will perhaps demonstrate what Alain means when he says, "Le génie éclate dans l'intrépidité du trait gravé à jamais, sans retouche possible."<sup>3</sup> Of Mme de Castries, Saint-Simon writes:

Mme. de Castries était un quart de femme, une espèce de biscuit manqué, extrêmement petite, mais bien prise, et aurait passé dans un médiocre anneau ...<sup>4</sup>

He paints an equally vivid picture of the reaction of the "premier président" to some misfortune:

Le premier président, assommé de ce dernier coup de foudre, se démonta le visage à vis, et je crus un moment son menton tombé sur ses genoux.<sup>5</sup>

Stressing Saint-Simon's indifference to effect, Alain writes, "Notre auteur n'a pas pris le temps de penser au style,"<sup>6</sup> and quotes with approval Saint-Simon's declaration, which may well have been Alain's own: "Je

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1. Hum., p. 3: "Rabelais". As an example of this "enivrement" Alain writes: "Rien n'est plus beau que le discours de Janotus: 'Rendez-nous les cloches!' On y sent une abondance qui ne fait que croître, et arrive à un joyeux délire (cloches, ohechando!)."

2. Hum., p. 23: "Saint-Simon".

3. Ibid., p. 34.

4. Ibid., p. 32.

5. Ibid., p. 31.

6. Ibid., p. 34.

ne fus jamais un personnage académique, je n'ai pu me défaire d'écrire rapidement."<sup>1</sup> However, only in his Mémoires, when writing for no public but simply for his own pleasure, does Saint-Simon achieve the "génie artiste",<sup>2</sup> whereas when he is writing for the court, for the dukes or the Regent, concern with eloquence and fine parlance dampens his spontaneity and he is far from experiencing "le bonheur d'écrire".<sup>3</sup>

If style and eloquence are mutually exclusive it comes as no surprise that Alain, loth to admit shortcomings in any great writer, confesses that Hugo and Fénelon, and Rousseau at times, are hard to read and in no way provoke "le bonheur de lire". Almost grudgingly, as he admires Hugo's poetic metaphors, Alain writes:

J'avoue que Hugo est trop long pour moi, presque toujours. Je le lis en courant et même j'en passe. Je vois trop où il va. ... Je le suis comme on suit le régiment, mais il m'arrive aussi d'aller l'attendre au bel endroit.<sup>4</sup>

He seems to be suggesting here that unpredictability is a virtue in a literary work and that the poet or novelist should do his utmost to disturb the reader's expectations.<sup>5</sup> Discussing the nature of the reader's experience, Alain claims that one of the attributes of poetry is precisely this "power to surprise": "J'ai observé qu'un poème, même si on le connaît bien, conserve intact le pouvoir de surprendre. Et je sais que ce pouvoir est la poésie même."<sup>6</sup> A good poet or writer is one who should

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1. Hum., p. 35.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. P.L., p. 117 (Propos I, p. 116).

5. The fact that Stendhal does so explains in part Alain's admiration for him: "Stendhal ne nous guette pas, il ne fait pas la chasse au lecteur; il aime mieux à rompre la preuve" (St., p. 810).

6. A.B., p. 932. In a "propos" (S.E., p. 158/Propos I, p. 1293), Alain expresses the same idea: "Et certes quand on a lu deux ou trois fois un court poème, l'effet de surprise devrait être épuisé; dans le fait il ne l'est point."

have such command of the reader's attention that the latter, even if he is acquainted with the work in question, should be able to hold his knowledge of the outcome in abeyance and not let it prevent him from reliving the experience of his initial reading of the text. When discussing Péguy's Jeanne d'Arc, Alain makes an interesting distinction between "parcourir" and "lire". Because one cannot read this work slowly and savour every detail in it or at least vary one's reading rhythm according to the "mouvements du terrain",<sup>1</sup> as Alain does when reading Balzac, it is wiser to "skim through" than to "read" Jeanne d'Arc: "... je dis parcourir non lire, parce que c'est toujours un peu la même chose, parce qu'on annonce encore dix volumes après celui-là, enfin parce que mon goût va à ceux qui expriment une grande idée avec peu de paroles;"<sup>2</sup> hence Alain's preference for "le style de Voltaire",<sup>3</sup> for Bayle, Galland, Gobineau, Saint-Simon, Dickens and Stendhal, who were "de la même lignée", to Rousseau, Diderot and Chateaubriand who tend to be too oratorical. But we cannot conclude that the "style de Voltaire" furnishes Alain's ultimate criterion of eloquence, for to do so would not account for Balzac, one of Alain's favourite writers, who criticised Stendhal's "phrase courte et sans rondeur",<sup>4</sup> so different from his own. In a "propos" on the subject of eloquence, Alain explains why he is able to admire both these writers:

Et on ne définirait pas mal Stendhal en disant qu'il est tout à fait étranger à l'éloquence. C'est un auteur qu'il faut relire d'instant en instant; car il ne répète point et ne développe point; c'est comme un paysage lointain; plus l'on s'approche et plus l'on découvre; aussi n'a-t-il point de rythme; il n'entraîne point; il

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1. See p. 147 above (A.B., p. 1016).

2. Dés. Jeanne d'Arc I, 7 Propos (mai 1926).

3. Hum., p. 74.

4. A.B., p. 1010.



ne veut pas entraîner; cela irait contre son art. D'où je comprends que Hugo l'orateur n'y ait rien compris. Balzac est entre deux; c'est encore de l'éloquence, mais pour l'œil. Il faut le relire aussi d'instant en instant; mais alors il se traduit tout d'un coup par des raccourcis; long à lire, et parfois diffus, il donne au souvenir des tableaux d'une concision admirable.<sup>1</sup>

It is in these "raccourcis", these "traits de style" and "bonheurs d'expression" which come as a surprise to the reader that Balzac redeems himself. Alain admires both Balzac and Stendhal because they respect the liberty of the reader and, far from desiring that he should be carried away by a flood of eloquence, encourage his ever renewed attention and active participation in the text.

So far discussion has been centred on Alain's criteria for prose writers, who, according to his terminology, are just as much "poets" as are many writers of verse; and this because the best among them know how to "faire sonner le langage", and to sharpen the reader's awareness. His criteria are identical where poets, in the traditional sense of the word, are concerned. There is the same stress on improvisation and spontaneity and the accompanying horror of the poet who merely puts his ideas into verse, as does Voltaire in his tragedies and Delille in his poems.<sup>2</sup>

Criticising Voltaire and Chateaubriand's attempts at verse Alain writes:

On peut tout mettre en vers, le jeu d'échecs, le bilboquet, les jardins; il n'y faut que de la patience. Mais les vrais vers, les beaux vers, veulent une sorte de patience aussi. Un beau poème mûrit lentement comme un fruit. Où est la différence? Peut-être comme d'un fruit naturel à un fruit en cire; ... Le vrai poème est un fruit de nature.<sup>3</sup>

There are in Alain's writings many fewer comments on poets than on prose writers, the reason being that he did not discover poetry until relatively late in life and when he did he worshipped Valéry almost to the exclusion

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1. P.L., p. 118 (Propos I, p. 117).

2. P.L., p. 64.

3. Ibid., p. 8 (Propos I, p. 910). See above, p. 130.

of all others. He welcomed in Mallarmé and Valéry "un autre climat des pensées"<sup>1</sup> and a more authentic approach to language than that found in the didactic and descriptive poets of the past. For these two poets exploited to its full the potential of the word and mastered to perfection the art of verbal juxtaposition, thus achieving the "magiques cristallisations du langage"<sup>2</sup> which are the mark of the true poem. For Valéry too the discipline imposed on the poet by material conditions, by the "forme vide"<sup>3</sup> or empty framework of the poem, was invaluable to creativity, and inspiration for its part was the fruit of improvisation. The following extract, taken from an article Alain wrote in commemoration of Valéry, aptly entitled "Hommage à la poésie", suggests that from some points of view at least Valéry and Alain have a common conception of poetic creation:

... Valéry ne fit jamais que secouer le langage et écouter ce son. D'où l'on voit que la rime est ici essentielle et définit le vers par son écho, qui fait une distance à remplir. Mais seul au monde, je pense, Valéry a dit: "il faut que la rime fasse raison." Sans cette rencontre qui suppose une immense patience, il n'y a point de poète. Valéry est tout nature. Il improvise toujours; toujours il risque. Il aime le risque. C'est là un bel attribut de la poésie. Il croit au langage. Il est sûr que le langage pur et simple signifie vérité. Je l'ai entendu me dire que, dès qu'on possédait un hémistiche, on était assuré de trouver de beaux vers ...<sup>4</sup>

We saw in the previous chapter that in Alain's opinion also the creative writer must be inspired by a spirit of adventure and must take risks,<sup>5</sup> but above all he must lay his faith in language, "se fier au langage".<sup>6</sup> The notion of metaphor, of central importance in Alain's view of poetry, he claims, perhaps over-modestly, to have inherited from Valéry. Talking of

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1. P.L., p. 17 (Propos I, p. 742).

2. H.P., p. 158.

3. Hun., p. 144.

4. Ibid., p. 154.

5. See above, p. 102.

6. H.P., p. 159.

"le choc de l'art"<sup>1</sup> which occurs when the artist by his choice of words expresses more in a single image than any lengthy description ever could, Alain writes:

Une chose tout à coup en exprime une autre; toute la poésie est en métaphore; et cette idée je la dois à Paul Valéry, qui disait que la poésie descriptive était impossible. Selon lui toute expression était indirecte, et, dans la poésie, ce qui est dit n'est jamais ce qui est dit.<sup>2</sup>

Such a conception of poetry calls, of course, for a considerable degree of participation and mental effort on the part of the reader whose task is not to interpret the poem in terms of what the poet had in mind at the moment of composition, but simply to make it meaningful for himself. This point was considered in an earlier chapter when Alain's commentary of "Le Cimetière Marin" was seen to be a fitting response to the poem's expressive ambiguity. We also saw earlier that the prerogative of metaphor in Alain's opinion was to create fresh meaning through an original use of language, and this creation of new "ideas" is, as the following remark reveals, an essential factor in Alain's ideal poem: "Chaque mot trouve sa place sonore, et éclate de tout son sens, ce qui fait des idées neuves. Et voilà le poème tel que je le veux."<sup>3</sup> The "idées neuves" in question are not abstract ideas but new and refreshing ways in which reality can be seen; glimpses of a world outside the range of our interpretive codes. Valéry's appreciation of the value of metaphor for the poet, and his ability to awaken the reader from his mechanical acceptance of the world as he knows it by striking images which conjure up in the reader's mind hitherto unperceived aspects of reality was no doubt one of the chief reasons for Alain's attraction to him.

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1. Hum., pp. 214-5.

2. Ibid.

3. P.L., p. 29 (Prolog I, p. 1176).



Turning now to consider in general Alain's criteria of criticism which are inspired by his poetic conscience, it would seem that his taste was for writers who achieve style not by looking for it, but by following the rules of the trade and trusting in language to do the rest, as the term "bonheur d'expression" implies. Inspired by his faith in language, Alain wrote:

Comme on est bien sûr que les dés jetés ne resteront pas sur le coupant, on est sûr que les mots jetés ne s'entasseront pas n'importe comment, et que ces merveilleuses molécules se juxtaposeront selon leurs surfaces.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps fitting at this juncture to quote a passage in which Alain refers to his own experience as a writer, and where he neatly sums up the notion of style behind his criteria of criticism discussed above:

... j'ai lu une quantité de livres où il n'y a point trace de style. On ne sait dire pourquoi; on ne sait même pas dire ce qui manque. Mais après cela Montaigne, vous serez ravi non seulement de ce qui est dit mais de la manière de dire qui pourtant est tout à fait commune, et sans beauté cherchée. Aussi comprend on aisément qu'imiter le style de Montaigne, ce n'est pas style. Rien n'est style, et ce qui cherche le style est hors du style. Que faire donc? Il faut écrire et encore écrire; après longues années on saura si l'on a du style. Et encore le saura-t-on? Je suppose qu'il y a dans le style un naturel parfait. Mais on se tromperait encore si l'on attendait le naturel. Le naturel ne passe qu'à travers un travail obstiné.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the nature of the activity under discussion, Alain never lets the reader lose sight of the value of hard work and effort. Here again the emphasis is on art as the fruit of perseverance and discipline, on the "naturel parfait" which Alain considers can only be achieved by the trinity of will, consciousness and life.

The foregoing discussion seems to suggest that Alain is hovering between two types of criticism. This movement away from "genres", illustrated when he speaks of the "poetry" both of verse poetry and of prose,

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1. H.P., p. 159.

2. Déd. M.M.-L., Les Cent Un Propos (1906).

suggests that his approach comes close to structuralist "new-criticism", where the critic merely reacts to what is in the text before him without judging the work according to his own pre-conceived standards and criteria. However, Alain is also, in some respects, a traditional critic as he makes value judgements through his critical preferences. But the combination of these two approaches is not without its merits, for it seems to me that it enables Alain to steer clear of the dangers inherent in both approaches. As we shall see in the next chapter, he is neither concerned with the minutiae of traditional literary scholarship, like the "Sorbon-agre", nor does he detract from the pleasure of reading, as do so many "new critics" who read the text through their structural, psycho-analytical or sociological concepts.

## 2. Literature as a Form of Knowledge

We saw in an earlier chapter that Alain deemed works of art, and indeed all manifestations of culture, more valuable for anyone attempting to explore human nature than the works of psychologists and moralists who, by filtering reality through thought, are losing much of the wealth of lived experience. He considers that great works of literature can bring the reader into the presence of an experience of a more integral nature than that analysed in the works of psychologists and certain philosophers. Voicing his preference for the works of literary artists, Alain writes:

Par une extrême défiance à l'égard des pensées qui ne coûtent rien, j'ai trouvé finalement plus d'idées réelles dans Homère, dans Goethe, dans Stendhal, dans Balzac que dans aucun philosophe.<sup>1</sup>

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1. P.L., p. 153.

"Idées réelles" are, we learn elsewhere, ideas born of experience, not thought: "L'homme prend toutes ses idées réelles dans son expérience de chaque jour; ou, pour mieux dire encore, il pense selon son action."<sup>1</sup> We can therefore infer that the "real ideas" which Alain sought in his reading, far from being the embodiment of some abstract ideas of the author, are born out of the movement of the novel and the protagonists' contact with reality. In another context, this time using the expression "pensées réelles", Alain throws more light on his conception of the type of reality on which ideas, or thoughts, can have a claim: "... une pensée réelle n'est jamais la suite d'une pensée, mais toujours l'effet d'une nature vivante qui se développe contre l'obstacle propre ..." <sup>2</sup> Here again we are reminded of the importance Alain attached to regulating one's thoughts on tangible reality.<sup>3</sup> Because of his mistrust of a certain kind of abstract thought, he saw the writer's task as being not one of explaining, demonstrating or proving, but of putting the reader in touch with immediate experience. This preference for "idées réelles" to the abstract ideas of the "philosophe monologuant"<sup>4</sup> posing as an artist, forms one of Alain's constant criteria of criticism and helps us to understand why he prefers Rousseau's Confessions to his Emile, and Tolstoy's novels to his more theoretical works, and why he learnt more from Balzac than from philosophers and politicians.

Alain's admiration for a particular writer does not necessarily mean that he shares his religious or political beliefs. He admires Balzac but does not agree with him on every count: "... des opinions de Balzac sur

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1. F.Phil., p. 74.

2. Ibid., p. 71.

3. See p. 29 above.

4. Propos I, p. 258.



la politique et sur la religion, je n'en ai pas pris une,"<sup>1</sup> he exclaims proudly. Indeed, agreement or disagreement with the views expressed by an author one enjoys is irrelevant, just as these views or opinions are irrelevant to the cultural value of the work in question. In the same "propos" Alain expands on this theme, recommending what he calls "un texte monumental",<sup>2</sup> the choice which humanity makes for the individual rather than a choice inspired by his own "paltry, personal ideas": "Celui qui ne lit que ~~ce~~ qui lui plaît, je le vois bien seul. Toujours en compagnie de ses ~~chétives~~ idées personnelles, comme on dit; mais il ne sortira pas d'enfance."<sup>3</sup> What the ideal reader should be seeking is not so much a corroboration of his own ideas on a specific subject as the "idées réelles" which he will find in all great writers, rather than in philosophical treatises. Alain's political views do not prevent him from enjoying novels whose protagonists embody ideals to which he is bitterly opposed. As one critic remarked, Alain is "magnificently free": "Le pacifiste suit très volontiers Fabrice à Waterloo, le radical s'enflamme avec Montriveau, l'ennemi des jésuites serre sur son cœur le curé Bonnet."<sup>4</sup>

The reason why Alain held Balzac in such esteem is to be found in the following lines: "Ce qui étonne dans Balzac, et ce qui fait qu'il règne absolument sur les romanciers, c'est que la pensée n'y prend jamais la forme triomphante d'une idée."<sup>5</sup> Thought in the Comédie Humaine never becomes rigid and systematised but remains "bête". To anyone not acquainted with Alain's thought the following remark might read like an adverse

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1. P.L., p. 65.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. R. Nimier, "Alain se révèle en expliquant ses auteurs favoris," Arts No. 671 (1958), pp. 1-2.

5. A.B., p. 1012.

piece of criticism: "J'oserais dire que toute pensée en Balzac reste bête, même la sienne."<sup>1</sup> The use of the word "bête" to evoke the reality of the "lived" as opposed to the "known" world and the nature of thought which does not reflect upon itself, is typical of Alain's earthy style and helps to drive home his awareness of the ineluctability of material reality. The term occurs again when he is speaking of Balzac and Stendhal who "pensaient à partir de la bêtise naturelle ...",<sup>2</sup> and the image is continued when he says of these two writers, "J'y trouve aussi plus de pensées que dans les penseurs. Ils remuent un fond de vase."<sup>3</sup> Balzac and Stendhal, in other words, are not at one remove from reality as are many thinkers whose theories and concepts isolate them from this "bêtise naturelle". Expressing his preference for Balzac to such thinkers, Alain wrote:

J'ai plus appris dans Balzac que dans les philosophes et les politiques. Car Balzac ne rejetait dans l'expérience même sur laquelle se fondent quelquefois les philosophes mais qu'ils ne savent pas conserver en leurs ouvrages. C'est ainsi qu'ils nous égarent dans les raisons.<sup>4</sup>

Balzac, however, knew how to retain an aura of lived experience. He was wary of superficial clarity and tried to convey much of the mystery, incoherence and ambiguity of life in his novels.<sup>5</sup> Alain's love of obscurity, which comes closer to capturing lived meaning than the clarity of representational language, manifests itself not only in his attacks on a certain kind of philosophy, but also when he is meditating on works of literature.

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1. A.B., p. 1012.

2. P.L., p. 14 (Propos I, p. 1098).

3. Ibid. The same image recurs in another "propos" (P.L., p. 60/Propos I, p. 1171), when Alain writes, "Les grands auteurs sont plus bêtes que nous. Ils nous éblouissent de nous."

4. A.B., p. 964.

5. Ibid., p. 936: "... Balzac est mystérieux naturellement, par un entassement de matière."

Commenting on Une Ténébreuse Affaire, he says that it brings out "ce génie d'obscurité et de complication dont la fertilité en notre auteur est démesurée". He appreciates in this novel "cette clarté amortie, ce dénouement en lui-même lointain, cette distance aux choses révélées ..." <sup>1</sup> It is significant that Alain uses the word "mysterious" when talking of the type of sign which constitutes culture: "... il faut des signes pour réfléchir. Le signe, gros de sens, et d'abord mystérieux, voilà le miroir des pensées." <sup>2</sup> Alain also admires Shakespeare for the "pensées en profondeur" <sup>3</sup> and absence of analytical thought which characterise his works. In the novel such an effect is usually difficult to achieve because writers too often indulge in an excess of analysis; but once again Balzac proves exceptional, for, claims Alain, "en Balzac il me semble que l'analyse épaissit la nature." <sup>4</sup> In a letter to a friend he includes a comment on Mme de Staël's Corinne, whose main protagonist dies a victim of social constraints. He believes the novel has its good points but is spoilt by the author's insistence that everything should be explained:

... j'ai lu Corinne ces jours; ce n'est pas nul pour les mœurs et les passions, mais cette pauvre femme croyait devoir boucher les trous et expliquer tout. Il faut des trous. <sup>5</sup>

It is easy now to appreciate why Alain was scornful of the novelist in whose works nothing remained implicit. "... dans le romancier qui pense trop son homme," he writes, "tout est défini dès le commencement;

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1. A.B., p. 949.

2. P.Phil., p. 264. He also appreciates the atmosphere of mystery in Dickens's novels: "Rien n'est dit principalement dans cet admirable roman, les Grandes Espérances, où tout est mystère" (Dick., p. 824).

3. A.B., p. 1013.

4. Ibid.

5. Correspondance, p. 236.



et je sens qu'il me raconte une histoire déjà finie. L'idée a tué le personnage."<sup>1</sup> He considered that the task of the novelist was not to describe, analyse or explain the actions of his protagonists. In a "propos" on the subject of naturalism he expounds at some length on how he should proceed:

... l'art du romancier est pourtant autre chose qu'un art de décrire et d'expliquer. Il faut que l'apparence revienne; il faut peindre, comme on dit; et cette métaphore vénérable dit beaucoup; car, que le peintre doive s'en tenir au vrai, c'est ce qui est évident; mais enfin l'on se moquerait du peintre si, à côté de chacun de ses personnages, il représentait encore le même être vu de profil ou de dos; nous savons bien qu'il n'est point vrai qu'on voit jamais en même temps deux aspects d'un être; ... Le peintre est donc tenu par l'apparence; et c'est son affaire d'enfermer tout le vrai qu'il pourra dans une seule apparence.<sup>2</sup>

If the novelist is to show us experience as it is lived and not merely refer to it, then he must be subject to the same conditions as the artist who cannot paint different aspects of the same facet of reality simultaneously because "they cannot all be true at the same time".<sup>3</sup> One of the most revealing "propos" in this respect is that which was written on the occasion of Kipling's winning the Nobel Prize in 1907:

Voilà un choix que j'approuve tout à fait. Justement, ces jours, je lisais quelques récits de cet auteur, et je prenais en pitié nos petits romanciers de quatre sous, couronnés par l'Académie française. Pourquoi? Parce que ce sont des sots. Et à quoi peut-on reconnaître un sot? A ceci, qu'il n'explique pas quand il faudrait et qu'il explique quand il ne faudrait pas.<sup>4</sup>

One can only conjecture as to who these "pennyworth" novelists might be. Paul Bourget perhaps, who was a member of the Académie française, or other writers of the psychological novel which was so much in vogue at the time. Kipling is compared favourably to the French writers in question as his

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1. *P.L.*, p. 50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 131: "... ces aspects divers d'une même chose ne peuvent être vrais dans le même temps ..."

4. *Propos* I, p. 23.

characters are not psychologically determined and their actions are not predictable. "Notre petit romancier", on the other hand, explains to the reader his hero's thoughts, feelings and wishes:

... il a lu Andromaque, et il est capable d'étaler sur son bureau de psychologue les rouages d'un homme. Il démonte et remonte. Il vous compose un caractère, d'où il fait sortir, hélas, des pensées, des projets, des actes.<sup>1</sup>

Dumas's Mousquetaires comes in for similar criticism: "Toute cette histoire anecdotique est fautive, et les sentiments sont aussi simples et aussi puérilement liés aux événements que dans une tragédie de Racine."<sup>2</sup> Alain was already speaking of the decadence of the novel in 1911, calling it "un genre usé".<sup>3</sup> His claim that "le vrai" should take precedence over the "vraisemblable" and that fiction often distorts the reality it is purporting to represent by explaining it and arranging it into a comprehensible form bears a striking resemblance to Robbe-Grillet's claim that "une explication, quelle qu'elle soit, ne peut être qu'en trop face à la présence des choses".<sup>4</sup> What a good writer should convey is the incoherence and complexity of experience; he should not give the impression that life is a logical, orderly sequence of events but that it is something which man's analytical faculty is not always capable of accounting for. Alain feels that a novelist should recount life as it is lived "sans ces inventions qui rendent les romans vraisemblables".<sup>5</sup> There follows a plea for reality as it is naïvely experienced as opposed to the mental reconstructions by which we attempt to explain it to ourselves:

Le réel tout seul est bien plus dramatique, bien plus symbolique, bien plus enseignant que n'importe quelle fiction, mais autrement. Non pas par l'enchaînement, la préparation, l'histoire des individus,

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1. Propos I, p. 24.

2. C.L. II, p. 64.

3. P.Est., p. 35 (Propos II, p. 233).

4. A. Robbe-Grillet, Pour un Nouveau Roman (1963), p. 45.

5. P.Est., p. 35 (Propos II, p. 234).

la reconstruction enfin que l'on admire dans Britannicus, modèle du genre; mais au contraire par la surprise, par la rupture des idées, par les abîmes d'ombre, par les rafales, par la présence de l'univers sournois; par la marche du temps aussi, qui est réglée, qui emporte d'un même mouvement toutes les choses de ce monde, sans un retour, sans un arrêt.<sup>1</sup>

Dickens Alain admired because his novels bear no trace of the verisimilitude which is often sought after by writers of fiction. The atmosphere of lived reality which pervades his novels is achieved in precisely the manner outlined above, by the unexpected turn of events and "la rupture des idées". In Dickens, "cette expérience continue remplace la description; elle ne dit point ce qui est, mais ce qui se fait."<sup>2</sup> The writers whom Alain most admired were those who were capable of recreating the world as it is lived, not of reconstructing it as it is known.<sup>3</sup> As we saw in the last chapter, he considered that a good novelist should recreate the unpredictability of life and disturb the reader's expectations by an unusual combination of words; he should not pander to certain literary conventions by creating a world of verisimilitude. In Dickens, existence is so real that it "pierces" us:

Le romancier lutte contre le vraisemblable. Il ne peut rien faire d'un quinquaiiler non invraisemblable. Telle est la règle de ce dessin que l'on fait avec des mots. Cette règle de style explique plus d'un trait imprévu; et il doit l'être. L'existence nous perce précisément par de tels traits.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that too many novelists write like historians and explain every event by attributing a cause to it leads Alain to outline the very different approach they should adopt. In the novel,

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1. F. Ast., p. 36 (Propos II, p. 234).

2. Dick., p. 822.

3. Ibid., p. 823. Alain appreciated Dickens' ability to create rather than reflect: "... toutefois je crois que ces découvertes de l'homme, qui sont en Dickens innombrables et neuves, résultent plutôt d'une création que d'une réflexion."

4. Dick., p. 829.

c'est l'humain et l'individuel humain qui fonde tout. L'histoire, au contraire, par son caractère abstrait, ramène toutes les actions à des causes extérieures. C'est pourquoi l'idée fataliste domine l'histoire ...<sup>1</sup>

The impression of fatality should however be absent from the novel: "le sentiment qui y domine est d'une vie où tout est voulu, même les passions et les crimes, même le malheur."<sup>2</sup> The pages Stendhal wrote on Waterloo and Tolstoy on Austerlitz are admirable because they are more than an abstract, factual account of a past event: "Ces peintures ont de la jeunesse; l'avenir ne s'y dessine point comme il sera."<sup>3</sup> As in real life there is in their novels an element of unpredictability.

Alongside Alain's criteria of judgement in matters of literary art which are determined by his view that works of culture should reflect the complexity and incoherence of experience are those which are determined by his own ideology. The importance he attached to liberty and will-power predisposed him naturally to deplore all manifestations of pre-determined behaviour. Zola, by placing his characters in a socially determined context and attributing too much importance to animal desires, is denying them the liberty and dignity of human beings: "Zola a vu la société humaine comme une machine dont le désir pousse les rouages," writes Alain, but he is mistaken, for "Ce n'est peut-être pas le désir qui meut le monde des hommes; c'est peut-être la passion."<sup>4</sup> Pride and other passions "which depend on the intelligence" are often stronger than mere animal desire, and this remark leads Alain to declare that perhaps Balzac's novels are "truer" ("plus vrai") than Zola's in this respect. Alain is disenchanted by Barrès, whose characters are often predetermined

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1. S.B.A., p. 453.

2. Ibid.

3. P.L., p. 135 (Propos I, p. 499).

4. Propos II, pp. 61-2.

biologically and socially, for the same reasons as he is by Zola. In none too flattering terms he talks of "la grossière littérature de Barrès et Cie",<sup>1</sup> when writing to a friend. Elsewhere he dismisses Colette Baudoche as "le livre le plus abject", and, as if that were not enough, adds, "On viendrait à aimer les chevaux, si l'on ne voyait que des hommes comme Barrès, Déroulède, Psichari, etc."<sup>2</sup> In one particular "propos", however, Alain begins by seeming to accept Barrès' notion of "enracinement" when he writes:

En somme, se rattacher au passé, accepter courageusement l'héritage, et relever la maison, tel est le devoir de résignation. Contre quoi péchent les révoltés qui veulent tout jeter par terre. En ce sens, il faut s'enraciner, et Barrès dit bien.<sup>3</sup>

But Barrès does not go far enough: "tout ce réel accepté n'est que moyen et outil." Man must resist his past; "l'habitude est animal, la tradition est animale;" such submission as Barrès advocates is, concludes Alain, only justifiable if it is a prelude to a brighter, freer future. But, "parce qu'il veut nier cette religion révolutionnaire, âme de toutes les religions, Barrès ne chantera jamais que des chants du soir, et des adieux à la vie ..."<sup>4</sup> Alain's simultaneous appreciation of individual liberty on the one hand, and of external necessity on the other, can nowhere be better seen than in his commentaries on Balzac and Stendhal.

Judith Robinson claims that these two writers were of symbolic value for Alain as they each upheld one or other of these two values:

... Balzac et Stendhal ont fini par prendre dans l'esprit d'Alain une sorte de valeur de symbole; toutes les oppositions qu'il a établies entre eux ont été peut-être essentiellement des oppositions entre le côté "balzacien" et le côté "stendhalien" de sa propre

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1. Correspondance, p. 196.

2. Lettres de Guerre, N.R.F., (1952: Hommage à Alain) Textes Inédits pp. 329-363.

3. Propos II, p. 201.

4. Ibid., p. 202.

pensée, entre la liberté intérieure et la nécessité extérieure, entre l'aspiration vers l'idéal et l'acceptation du réel, entre l'esprit de révolte et l'esprit d'obéissance.<sup>1</sup>

Balzac and Stendhal were Alain's favourite writers<sup>2</sup> and the only ones, besides Dickens, on whom he wrote a commentary of any length. Judith Robinson claims that his definitive judgements of Balzac and Stendhal are those of a moralist who is seeking in his reading both a true reflection of the world and a lofty conception of human nature.<sup>3</sup> He admires Stendhal's heroes for the ideals they represent and their nobility of character, and Balzac's because they accept the world as it is with its social constraints. In everyday life we are however more likely to meet with a character out of Balzac than one out of Stendhal and for this reason Balzac's novels present a truer picture of the reality we live. Judith Robinson believes that in the final analysis this was why Alain preferred Balzac to Stendhal.<sup>4</sup> It would however seem to me that his definitive judgement is, in this case, not that of a moralist but stems from his conception of what literary art should be. As we saw earlier, Alain claims that Balzac reigns supreme because, in his novels, thought never becomes an idea: "... ce qui fait qu'il règne absolument sur les romanciers, c'est que la pensée n'y prend jamais la forme triomphante d'une idée."<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Proust the criteria of the moralist and the literary theorist clash. Proust, unlike many bad novelists whose works are a "display"<sup>5</sup> of lifeless, clichéd metaphors imposed on reality rather than

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1. Alain Lecteur de Balzac et de Stendhal (1958), p. 243.

2. P.L., p. 144 ("mes préférés").

3. Op. cit., p. 243.

4. A.B., p. 1012.

5. P.L., p. 136 (Proust I, p. 339): "étalage de métaphores".



born out of it, depicts what Alain calls "une vérité immédiate":<sup>1</sup>

Voyez comment Proust va à l'objet. Etudiez de près ses métaphores aquatiques; on dirait qu'il ne peut faire apparaître l'objet qu'en le déformant; plus réel, l'objet vu à travers d'autres objets, plus réel que dans sa vérité nue.<sup>2</sup>

However, in spite of his considerable art which Alain appreciates, Proust's works are spoilt in Alain's eyes by the importance he attributes to the unconscious mind and by the theme of heredity:

L'hérédité est une doctrine qui a fondu. Mais les romanciers n'en sont pas encore avertis. ... L'inconscient est aussi un personnage à tout faire; et je crois que ces deux divinités ne sont qu'une sous deux noms. Ces fantômes d'idées se voient encore dans Marcel Proust, d'ailleurs physiologiste incomparable et dont la mort certainement nous prive au moins de deux ou trois volumes dont personne ne nous donnera l'équivalent. Ceux qui veulent s'instruire de la psychologie réelle doivent la chercher dans ces puissantes analyses ... D'autres lisent les signes, mais lui les reconstruit à partir des éléments.<sup>3</sup>

Alain is denouncing here the error involved in treating the unconscious as an autonomous region of the mind when he sees it as part of an organic whole and accessible to the will. He could not however remain insensitive to the quality of Proust's art and concludes the same "propos" with the words, "Et ce préjugé d'école fait tâche, et vilaine tâche en cette œuvre magistrale, comme un informe paquet de fil dans une toile bien tissée."<sup>4</sup>

Although his most constant criterion stems from his conception of what literary art should be, the moralist in Alain is responsible for some of his judgements in literary matters. The importance he attaches to liberty and the human will can be seen in his appreciation of those writers who portray the individual pitting himself against opposing

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1. *P.L.*, p. 136 (*Propos I*, p. 339).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 129 (*Propos II*, p. 669).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

forces. Tolstoy he values as much for his creation of Koutousof who triumphs over adversity, as for that of Anna Karenina whom he describes as being like a bird caught in the trap of the mechanical world. Anna's fault, in Alain's eyes, is that she does not assume total responsibility for herself; she lacks the will to be free: "... vous ne comprendriez pas assez la faute d'Anna, celle de Wronski, et comment ce monde creux et mécanique punit ceux qui y croient<sup>en</sup>." <sup>1</sup> In another "propos" he talks of Anna's "insuffisance intérieure" which manifests itself in "un abandon de l'intime gouvernement, une fatalité reconnue, une prédiction sur soi, une épouvante de soi." <sup>2</sup> Although an atheist, Alain was not prepared to dispense with the Bible; it was for him as much a source of meditation as were other classics of literature. The importance he attached to the symbolic truths contained in myths, legends and parables was briefly mentioned in the introductory chapter. <sup>3</sup> His reflections on the parable of the fig-tree, in Les Dieux, are again centred around the force of the human will. Jesus comes across a fig-tree which bears no fruit, and realising it is not the season for figs curses the tree and it withers and dries up. If, Alain reflects, it is not the season for figs then it cannot be a question of fig-trees in the parable, but of human beings. He concludes that the parable shows us that men should act like thinking human beings, not like "administrative fig-trees":

Mais, dit le Seigneur, êtes-vous donc des figuiers, qui reçoivent tout du dehors, et rendent seulement les circonstances selon ce qu'ils savent faire? Ou bien êtes-vous des hommes, qui se savent et même qui se veulent libres de distribuer les réserves de leur être seulement selon eux? <sup>4</sup>

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1. F.L., p. 147.

2. Ibid., p. 160.

3. See p. 17 above.

4. D., pp. 1331-2.

Yet again Alain shows us that it is not through the maxims of La Rochefoucauld or the dissertations of psychologists that man should aspire to self-knowledge; he will find a truer reflection of himself in myths, legends, parables and all great works of literature. Dickens, to name but one of the masters, Alain places "au premier rang des moralistes" because of his "manière profonde et diabolique de faire grimacer notre image dans le miroir qu'il nous tend".<sup>1</sup>

For Alain great works of literature were of both cultural and cathartic value; he believed that they could only lead to a deeper understanding of human nature by first relieving the pressure of the emotions, by "exorcising" the mind. His criteria of criticism in general result from his conviction that reading should be a therapeutic and humanising exercise; for him, the value of a literary text lies not in the factual information imparted but in the exercise offered by the reading of it. In an earlier chapter works of art were referred to as being capable of exorcising the mind when it is haunted by unreal passions; truth, according to Alain, can only be found within ourselves "par une purification d'abord des pensées qui dépendent de nous. C'est bien ce que signifie l'exorcisme."<sup>2</sup> Poems and novels and other works of literature offer the reader an object on which to regulate his "instables pensées", and a chance to discipline "cette fureur de parler à soi qui est la pensée".<sup>3</sup> The reading of a novel or of poetry can offer relief from introspection and the mechanism of abstract reasoning and enables the reader to experience, through the participation of more than the intellect alone, a beneficial feeling of wholeness.

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1. Mem., p. 925.

2. D., pp. 1241-2.

3. P.L., p. 68 (Propos I, p. 374).



If we consider the commentaries which seem to have been largely motivated by Alain's preoccupation with literature as a form of exorcism, one group of writers springs immediately to mind, those who provoke laughter: Rabelais, Molière, La Fontaine, Voltaire, Dickens and Sterne, to name but his favourites. Alain values laughter highly because it is liberating, because it enables man to stand back and look with detachment upon the pettiness and mechanisms of his everyday existence, thus freeing himself from them. In an article on Rabelais, he points to the peculiar character of the comic catharsis:

Mais où est donc l'esprit? Il consiste dans l'attitude d'un homme qui entend de folles déclamations et qui, les reconnaissant en lui-même, s'en sépare et les met devant lui au rang des choses, et ainsi s'en délivre.<sup>1</sup>

Most of Alain's theoretical writings on the subject of comedy, in the Système des Beaux-Arts, for example, are concerned in particular with the theatre. The basic distinction which he makes between what he calls "la grande comédie" and "la comédie moyenne" is that in the former one only laughs at oneself, whereas in the latter one laughs at the expense of others.<sup>2</sup> In great comic characters, such as those in Molière's plays, we recognise portraits of ourselves as we could be, and Alain adds, again pointing to the value of the comic catharsis, "... ces portraits nous rassurent et nous délivrent, par ce rire qui nous rend à nous-mêmes, entiers, naufs, renouvelés."<sup>3</sup> Alain's reference here to the feeling of wholeness experienced by the spectator of a comedy is reminiscent of Valéry's definition of great art (which will be discussed in the next chapter) as being that which enables the spectator to exercise all his

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1. Hum., pp. 7-8.

2. S.B.A., p. 336: "La marque de la grande comédie c'est que l'on n'y rit que de soi."

3. Ibid., p. 336.

faculties. L'Ecole des Femmes is not intended to teach a lesson to any particular Arnolphe, but to the potential Arnolphe in every man. Likewise Molière's doctors are modelled on no-one in particular, but represent what every doctor or professional man could become if too full of self-importance:

... il n'existe point de médecins de Molière; mais toute science, surtout utile et respectée, s'appuie toujours un peu sur le respect et sur les insignes, toujours assez, toujours trop. C'est pourquoi le plus grand médecin rira lui de lui-même, et se sauvera de lui-même par le rire ...<sup>1</sup>

Laughter, in "la grande comédie", is not marred by the thought that we are laughing at the expense of others, or are being laughed at, it is purely cathartic, a point which Alain makes when he forcefully concludes his chapter entitled "Les Leçons de la Comédie": "Il est donc rigoureusement vrai de dire que la comédie nous délivre des passions par le rire."<sup>2</sup>

Parody and satire, on the other hand, like "la comédie moyenne", which Alain opposes to his notion of "great comedy", encourage us to laugh at the expense of others. On the subject of parody he writes, "Mais cet art facile, qui est à peine un art, nous trompe tout à fait sur les moyens de la vraie comédie."<sup>3</sup> Alain claims that Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi, because of its undeniable cathartic value, surpasses mere satire and enters the realm of "great comedy": "La Grande Comédie se montre, et les passions, dépouillées de toute parure et de toute pensée, secouent toute l'importance par le rire."<sup>4</sup> Fernand Crommelynck's play, Le Cocu Magnifique, which was staged in 1920, likewise belongs to "la grande comédie". Everyone

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1. S.B.A., p. 337.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 338: "C'est que la parodie nous délivre d'admirer les autres, au lieu que la comédie nous délivre de nous admirer nous-mêmes."

4. P.Est., p. 110 (Propos I, p. 337).

recognises in Bruno's one-way conversations with Estrugo, who is never given the chance to reply, something of his own exaggerated sense of self-importance. However, in Alain's opinion, the play is marked by the intrusion of certain physiological laws which, he considers, are far from causing laughter:

La grande comédie se moque naturellement de la morale; ... le grand rire balaise tout; aussi n'est-ce point pour des raisons tirées de la morale que la grande comédie doit rester chaste, mais pour des raisons de physiologie peut-être ...<sup>1</sup>

As the value of laughter is therapeutic, only human faults and weaknesses which can be corrected should be made fun of, not physical characteristics or defects; as Alain remarks in the Système des Beaux-Arts when discussing the conditions of comedy, a real hunchback would be unbearable on the stage.<sup>2</sup>

Turning now from the theatre to a wider consideration of Alain's theory of laughter, and in particular to his commentaries on Rabelais, La Fontaine and Voltaire, we shall see that there are many points in common between his theory and that of Bergson. Alain himself suggests the comparison and at the same time hints that Bergson did not go quite far enough, when he writes:

Celui qui a dit que le rire naît du spectacle de l'homme mécanique a dit une bonne moitié de la chose; mais ce n'est encore que le rire de pensée; l'ironie grimace.<sup>3</sup>

"Laughter is the human remedy," he says in the same "propos" when discussing Rabelais, but it is bad to hold it in check, as many people full of a sense of their own importance tend to do. The folly of human passions must be judged, "seulement il faut la juger à son niveau et par gymnastique la

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1. P.Est., p. 124 (Propos II, p. 463).

2. S.B.A., p. 338.

3. P.L., p. 88 (Propos I, p. 317).



réduire, non par dialectique."<sup>1</sup> Although Alain agrees with Bergson that laughter is valuable as a corrective, that its cause should be "raideur" rather than "laideur",<sup>2</sup> he finds Bergson's theory too intellectual. To his contention that the comic "s'adresse à l'intelligence pure",<sup>3</sup> Alain would reply that to realise its cathartic effect it must involve both body and mind and induce a state of relaxation. He refers frequently to the physiological benefits of the act of laughing aloud, speaking of the "diaphragm which relaxes"<sup>4</sup> on one occasion and in a "propos" on Voltaire he describes laughter as "the heroic remedy" as "l'homme se laisse d'être tendu comme un tambour".<sup>5</sup> He cannot overstress the importance of the physiological act and criticises those who have written on the subject for not taking it into account. Perhaps he had Bergson in mind when he wrote the following lines:

J'ai lu des dissertations sur le rire, trop loin de la chose même.  
Pour comprendre ce que c'est que rire il faut regarder attentivement  
un homme qui rit, et comprendre que le mouvement convulsif des  
épaules y est le principal ...<sup>6</sup>

This hearty laughter which Alain approves and advocates as it reconciles body and mind is provoked by writers like Rabelais, Molière and Voltaire who, unlike La Fontaine who gives no cause for raucous laughter, are in Alain's words, "dans le jeu, ce qui se voit au rire".<sup>7</sup> La Fontaine Alain

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1. *P.L.*, p. 69.

2. H. Bergson, *Le Rire* (1924), p. 29: "Si donc on voulait définir le comique en le rapprochant de son contraire, il faudrait l'opposer à la grâce plus encore qu'à la beauté. Il est plutôt raideur que laideur." Using the term "mécanique", which characterises his theory for Alain, Bergson writes, "Les attitudes, gestes et mouvements du corps humains sont risibles dans l'exacte mesure où le corps nous fait penser à une simple mécanique."

3. H. Bergson, *Le Rire*, p. 4.

4. *P.L.*, p. 90 (*Propos I*, p. 252).

5. *S.E.*, p. 37 (*Propos II*, p. 813).

6. *Propos I*, p. 78.

7. *S.B.A.*, p. 28: "Rien ne réconcilie mieux l'esprit et le corps."

8. *P.L.*, p. 90 (*Propos I*, p. 251).

admires for more subtle reasons. The fact that concepts current in the human world, such as deceit, flattery and jealousy, are absent from the Fables leads Alain to suppose that La Fontaine had no axe to grind, none of the pretensions of someone anxious to impose an idea, and that he was "not a tyrant at all".<sup>1</sup>

Le génie propre de La Fontaine fut sans doute en ceci qu'il était comme absent de lui-même, et sans aucun mélange de sa pensée avec ses actions ...<sup>2</sup>

The world depicted in the Fables is a world from which thought is absent:

Et c'est bien cette pensée sans pensée que la fiction des fables remonte au niveau de l'homme, mettant en forme ce que le corps voudrait dire. Cette rude idée, bonne à tous, et vraie dans sa pureté, est faussée seulement par le mélange; c'est pourquoi cette comédie animale est bonne et saine à penser, comme objet et sans commentaires. Toute explication de l'immortel dialogue entre le loup et l'agneau périt par ce mélange des pensées humaines, soit qu'on repousse le cynisme, soit qu'on l'accepte, soit qu'on le mesure; le chien n'est pas cynique, il est chien. Par cette présentation de l'idée en objet, sans aucun concept, la fable est esthétique.<sup>3</sup>

In La Fontaine's Fables, passions are portrayed as Descartes would have had them portrayed, in an utterly mechanical way and a way which would offend man's sense of dignity if he sought to interpret them with his intellect alone.<sup>4</sup> The intellect always finds reasons for not believing something it does not wish to believe and, being too often on the defensive, cannot appreciate the Fables. But, as Alain says, we do not have to prove to ourselves that the Fables are true, for the colour, resonance and solidity of the situations depicted within them "make us certain with our whole being of what we would accept, reject or ignore with our intellect alone."<sup>5</sup> Yet again Bergson's claim that the comic must "appeal to the

1. P.L., p. 91 (Propos I, p. 253).

2. Ibid.

3. S.B.A., p. 284.

4. D., p. 1329: "C'est pourquoi le cynisme animal nous instruit mieux que les preuves, d'autant que nous ne sommes pas en défiance, parce que le récit ne se donne pas comme vrai."

5. Alain, The Gods, transl. Richard Pavear (1975), p. 155.

intelligence alone" does not account for a great comic writer.

If we consider Alain's interpretation of the notion of "esprit", we find once again that his theory is much more far-reaching than Bergson's and lends itself more readily to the notion of comic catharsis. For Alain, "l'esprit" in its widest sense is a liberating force. In his interpretation, the mental capacity to mock, and thence to doubt, opens the way to freedom:

L'esprit, en son sens le plus commun, est ce qui se moque de tout. Ce sens est bon; il mène aisément à la notion d'esprit qui est au fond le pouvoir de douter, ce qui est s'élever au-dessus de tous les mécanismes, ordre, vertus, devoirs, dogmes, les juger, les subordonner, et les remplacer par la liberté même, qui ne doit rien qu'à soi. Si Dieu est esprit, Dieu est libre et pour le libre.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his writings Alain frequently refers to the rich etymological connotations of the word. In a "propos" on Molière he writes, extolling the virtues of laughter:

Ce jugement par le rire marque le plus haut pouvoir de l'esprit. Ce beau mot d'esprit, en tous ses sens, nous invite à louer Molière encore mieux que nous n'aurions voulu ...<sup>2</sup>

The idea of laughter, or wit, as a liberating force can perhaps best be seen in Alain's remarks on Voltaire; "... l'esprit est directement opposé au fanatisme," he writes in Les Dieux:

C'est pourquoi, parmi les héros de l'esprit, il faudra toujours citer Voltaire, quoiqu'il refuse cette honneur, et très justement parce qu'il le refuse. L'esprit n'est rien, dit l'esprit. A chaque trait d'esprit il meurt un système ...<sup>3</sup>

Alain considers that Candide is a profound book because in it everything is demolished.<sup>4</sup> In a "propos" entitled "Carnaval" he makes further allusion to Candide and comments yet again on the instructive nature of

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1. D., p. 1056.

2. P.L., p. 93 (Propos II, p. 457).

3. D., p. 1318.

4. Ibid., p. 1319.

the semantic wealth contained in the word "esprit":

Encore une fois le langage nous instruit; car il appelle esprit, c'est le plus beau des noms, ce pouvoir supérieur de se moquer, qui est toujours le signe d'un sérieux très menaçant. Il y a du Carnaval dans Candide; ... Quant au vrai Carnaval, il n'est plus de ce temps-ci. Il y faut, à ce que je crois, un excès de tyrannie, de sérieux, d'inégalité, à quoi il réponde.<sup>1</sup>

Then follows perhaps the most significant of Alain's remarks on the subject of comedy: "La Grande Comédie suppose de grands pouvoirs."<sup>2</sup> Beside this interpretation where wit and mocking laughter are considered as arms in the face of political oppression, Bergson's narrow interpretation of the term appears limited and unimaginative. For him "esprit" means, in its widest sense, "a certain dramatic way of thinking",<sup>3</sup> and in its more limited sense he describes it as "une certaine disposition à esquiver en passant des scènes de comédie".<sup>4</sup>

Ernst Cassirer appears to have appreciated the same liberating effect of the comic in certain works of literature. The following lines, taken from his Essay on Man, aptly describe Alain's own conception of the comic catharsis:

We are perhaps never nearer to our human world than in the works of a great comic writer — in Cervantes' Don Quixote, Sterne's Tristram Shandy, or in Dickens' Pickwick Papers. We become observant of the minutest details; we see this world in all its narrowness, its pettiness, and silliness. We live in this restricted world but we are no longer restricted by it. Such is the peculiar character of the comic catharsis. Things and events begin to lose their material weight; scorn is dissolved into laughter and laughter is liberation.<sup>5</sup>

This passage becomes all the more relevant when we consider that Alain was a fervent admirer of both Tristram Shandy and Pickwick Papers. In a

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1. S.E., p. 38 (Propos II, p. 813).

2. Ibid.

3. H. Bergson, Le Rire (1924), p. 106: "Au lieu de manier ses idées comme des symboles indifférents, l'homme d'esprit les voit, les entend, et surtout les fait dialoguer entre elles comme des personnes."

4. E. Bergson, op. cit., p. 108.

5. E. Cassirer, An Essay on Man (1944), p. 150.

letter to a friend he writes, "Je lis Tristram Shandy et je ris bien; je goûte ce genre de comique."<sup>1</sup> More explicitly, in an article for la Revue de France, he wrote of this same book, "C'est une grosse plaisanterie dans le genre de Rabelais ... C'est une parodie énorme de la vie bourgeoise."<sup>2</sup> His evident appreciation here of parody and satire shows to what extent Alain's thought on the subject had evolved since he wrote the Système des Beaux-Arts twenty-seven years earlier. He had come to realize that it was not only his own soul which needed to be purged of the mechanisms which governed it, but society itself. Pickwick Papers, which Alain appreciates as much for its illustration of the English sense of humour, which he strangely enough chooses to qualify as "une chose de Voltaire",<sup>3</sup> as for its simplicity of style, again apparently inherited from Voltaire, receives ample comment in his book on Dickens. The following remark on the subject of English humour points to the value of laughter as a mental stimulus and liberating force in an unconscious and mechanical world:

Je crois que le principal de l'humour anglais est ce style que je viens de dire, et qui dit ornement ce que personne ne dit. Souvent, une froide remarque, simple et claire, suffit pour faire rire quand ce ne serait qu'en faisant apparaître l'allure mécanique sous la prétention du penseur.<sup>4</sup>

Further examples of Alain's appreciation of the cathartic value of the comic abound, but to dwell longer on this aspect would be to neglect other areas of literature which are also capable of relieving the pressure of emotions. As we saw when discussing poetic language, Alain was fully aware of the capacity of poetry to regulate and control the mechanism of

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1. Correspondance, p. 106.

2. "Littérature anglaise," M.F. No. 300 (mai-août 1947), pp. 11-12.

3. Dick., p. 832.

4. Ibid., p. 836.

language, too often the unconsciously applied tool of an emotion-tortured mind. In one of the Propos de Littérature we read, "... les écrivains disciplinent ... cette fureur de parler à soi qui est la pensée."<sup>1</sup> In a passage in Les Dieux, Alain comments further on this virtue which is shared by all great works of literature:

... Montaigne, Sévigné, Voltaire, Montesquieu, et tant d'autres ont conservé le beau langage, et nous sauvent à chaque instant de notre bégaiement propre et d'abord de notre gazouillement d'enfance ...<sup>2</sup>

In an earlier chapter Alain was quoted as having described poetic language as a "consolation".<sup>3</sup> In the Système des Beaux-Arts more light is thrown on his interpretation of this term. The concluding sentence from the following extract, with its reference to the overcoming of mechanisms, suggests that poetry and comedy are cathartic for the same reasons:

Il y a de l'assurance et un beau départ dans la récitation poétique, et un soulèvement déjà, comme de l'avion qui roule. L'esprit se détache alors de sa propre mémoire et la juge avec sécurité; en ce sens il saisit mieux sa propre vie intérieure, et la délivre par ce mouvement. Et comme toute consolation dans le sens plein revient toujours à cela, j'entends à déposer ou à rejeter un mécanisme, la récitation poétique serait comme un essai de la force consolatrice.<sup>4</sup>

Thus it is that a reading of Dante or Virgil can lead to personal salvation. Of Dante's great epic, underlining the value of the detached contemplation of human passions, Alain writes:

Qui se regarde se juge; qui se juge se sauve. Tout examen de conscience est ici enfermé. Descendre pour remonter. Tout ce qui m'est si près, tout ce qui est moi, en spectacle et comme réculé et séparé. Par le secours du poète.<sup>5</sup>

Singing, like poetry, is also of cathartic value and helps to overcome the

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1. P.L., p. 68.1.

2. D., p. 1212.

3. See p. 90 above.

4. S.B.A., pp. 272-3.

5. P.L., pp. 84-5 (Propos I, p. 228).



mechanisms of bodily passions, a point which is made clear in George Sand's Consuelo, of which Alain writes:

Dans une belle œuvre, que je voudrais mettre sous le nez des critiques, et dont le titre, Consuelo, qui veut dire consolation, est symbolique, George Sand fait comprendre que le chant est une méthode pour vivre, pour supporter, pour surmonter. Et que serait la danse, si elle n'était un art d'aimer qui sauve l'homme de l'animal?<sup>1</sup>

Rousseau in his turn receives comment for having analysed this virtue of dancing<sup>2</sup> in La Nouvelle Héloïse:

Rousseau, dans la Nouvelle Héloïse, explique très bien les raisons de la danse villageoise ... Par ces mouvements réglés et répétés, donc, l'amour se laisse penser; l'amour prend assurance; l'amour cesse de balbutier.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere Alain comments on another aspect of the cathartic which is illustrated in Rousseau's works. In Julie, animal desire is seen to be transformed into human feeling: "Le désir devenait sentiment."<sup>4</sup> The novel shows that no-one is free from animal passions, but, writes Alain, "il faut les conduire, les ramener, vouloir l'ordre humain."<sup>5</sup> Even Balzac can be mentioned in these pages as for him it is religion which saves men from the animal within himself. In the Cahiers de Lorient Alain writes, "La religion est pour lui le seul remède aux passions; il le montre avec force."<sup>6</sup> As these few examples show, Alain seldom misses the opportunity of stressing the cathartic value of works of literary art

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1. P.L., pp. 62-3 (Propos I, p. 922).

2. V.L., p. 484. Dancing, the symbolic ceremony, is described as "une purification aussi des passions. La danse guerrière n'est pas le combat; la danse religieuse n'est pas l'effervescence contagieuse des foules; la danse amoureuse n'est pas le délire de l'amour."

3. V.L., p. 485.

4. P.L., p. 99 (Propos II, p. 257).

5. P.L., p. 100 (Propos II, p. 258).

6. C.L., pp. 164. Propos II, p. 125: "Une civilisation, c'est un système contre les passions. ... la thèse de Balzac est que le catholicisme est un système admirable contre l'animal humain."

and of other human activities represented within them which are both of disciplinary and of liberating value.

It is therefore not only the exercise of composition which, as we saw in Chapter III, can complement the fragmentary nature of thought itself and discipline "nos instables pensées", but the act of reading also. The reader who is seeking to satisfy the demands of his intellect alone will, however, not derive the same beneficial effects from his activity as the one who exercises all his faculties in appreciation of the work before him. Logical coherence in works of literary art certainly provided no yardstick for Alain, but it is perhaps true to say that the absence of it did. His belief that extreme logic is laughable serves to bring together the two parts of this chapter:

Il suffit quelquefois d'une perspective de sérieux pour faire rire, D'où l'on s'explique que l'extrême logique soit risible. Il suffit d'arranger les choses en paroles, telles que l'esprit les ferait sans le choc de l'expérience.<sup>1</sup>

"The shock of experience", of reality as it is rather than as we conceive it to be, which the best novels make the reader feel, shows him at the same time the absurdity of the logically coherent world he has built around himself in order to forestall the unpredictable. A mind which aspires after the ordered and the rational is not, in Alain's eyes, the best equipped to appreciate a work of literature. In the next chapter we shall consider in more detail the state of mind which Alain suggests the reader of literature would do well to adopt.

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1. Ibid., p. 1317.

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C H A P T E R      V

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CHAPTER     V  
"LE BONHEUR DE LIRE"

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If one main point has emerged from these pages, it must surely be that Alain is more concerned with thought as it is lived than with thought in a product of mind; with mental experience rather than with intellectualised constructions. His sympathy goes to those thinkers whose works boast a similar interest in the conditions of knowledge and the absence of any obsession with an ulterior quest, be it the philosopher's absolute truth<sup>1</sup> or the artist's ideal of perfection. Rather than attempt to classify and categorise lived meaning into some well-defined and comprehensible form which he could detachedly contemplate, Alain preferred to concentrate his attention on mental activity in the stages preceding conceptualisation, to consider the diversity of reality in its namelessness rather than to discolour it by defining it. He believed that thought too often degenerated into a mechanism and that it was the prerogative of the authentic thinker to explore the true nature of consciousness which this mechanism obscured.

Alain's admiration for Valéry, whom he once rather revealingly described as "la mère de toutes les pensées",<sup>2</sup> can be explained by the fact that the working method which the latter advocated, one of exploration and experimentation, was, in his opinion, infinitely superior to the practices adopted by most philosophers. "Le savoir n'est plus une fin mais

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1. A.C., p. 359: "Toujours est-il que l'amour de la vérité en soi me paraît ... un simple jeu de paroles."

2. H.P., p. 152.

un moyen,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Valéry in one of his Notebooks, and added, pointing to a new direction in philosophical thinking, "or, le Philosophe fut celui pour lequel il était une fin." He is referring in fact to the type of philosopher with whom Alain was loth to be identified, the "truthmongers" and system-builders discussed in an earlier chapter.<sup>2</sup> Valéry and Alain were both interested above all in the potential of the human mind and in the seeking of methods which would exploit this potential fully. A jotting in one of Valéry's Notebooks aptly describes this preoccupation which was central to his thought and to Alain's: "Nous n'avons pas à expliquer l'univers mais à l'exploiter."<sup>3</sup> They were convinced, as Valéry declared when reflecting on Leonardo, that "il n'existe pas de pensée qui extermine le pouvoir de pensée et le conclue",<sup>4</sup> that there is no idea which puts an end to thought. Alain expresses the same belief when he writes in a "propos", rejecting the possibility of second-hand thought, "On voudrait des pensées bien prouvées, et puis n'y plus penser; cela ne va point."<sup>5</sup> For Alain, writing was merely an exercise; it was an attempt not to give a definitive form to ideas but to capture the force of thought before it was rendered impotent by conventional discourse. In his essay on "Léonard et les Philosophes", published in 1929, Valéry speaks of the limited method of the philosopher who describes in systematic form what he has already thought out.<sup>6</sup> He believes that such a conventional form of expression cannot account for every nuance of lived

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1. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. Judith Robinson (1973), p. 637.

2. See above, p. 25.

3. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. cit., p. 590.

4. P. Valéry, Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci, Ouvres I (1957), p. 1219: Note et Digression.

5. V.E., p. 198 (Propos I, p. 607).

6. P. Valéry, Ouvres I (1957), p. 1262.

experience and can only convey superficial thought. "Penser profondément," on the other hand, "ce n'est que penser loin, penser le plus loin possible de l'automatisme verbal."<sup>1</sup> Of this "profound thought" we catch some glimpses in Valéry's own poetry which for him was a way of transcending the verbal mechanism and acceding, through language, to the functioning of the mind beneath. Poems were for him perpetual experiments with words parallel to the ceaseless inner movements of the self and in a certain sense he believed they were never finished.<sup>2</sup> This has however to be reconciled with the fact that poems do have a point of completion and organic unity of their own; as one critic writes:

Though the work can never be finished to the ceaselessly moving mind which creates it, it can be finished in terms of its own aesthetic equilibrium or organic unity.<sup>3</sup>

Considering where their priorities lay, it is easy to appreciate that for Alain, as for Valéry, a literary text is valuable because of the experience to which it gives rise quite apart from any ideas it may contain. Alain's literary commentaries reveal his awareness of the value of reading as a mental exercise and are characterised by a disregard for the minutiae of erudition which are too often the main preoccupation of those engaged in literary studies. "... le plaisir de lire a été ma principale étude,"<sup>4</sup> Alain claims in his intellectual autobiography, and his many reflections on the activity of reading bear this out. Certain remarks which Alain makes in the Preface to his commentary on La Jeune Parque illustrate to what extent his idea of the reader's role coincides

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1. P. Valéry, Ouvrages I (1957), p. 1263.

2. P. Valéry, Cahiers (C.N.R.S.) Vol. XIV (1957-1961), p. 127: "Rien n'est jamais achevé quant à elle seule -- et par soi seule. L'interruption ou l'abandon sont la loi réelle." (Cité Christine M. Crow, Paul Valéry, Consciousness and Nature (1972), p. 199)

3. Christine M. Crow, op. cit., p. 199.

4. H.P., p. 194.



with Valéry's. He makes clear the distance which separates him from the realist approach to literature, from those for whom a literary text must reflect "a slice of life": "... ce que le pauvre lecteur attend, l'histoire enfin, l'histoire manque tout à fait."<sup>1</sup> The same reader is deprived of his spiritual food, "cet aliment de l'esprit qui est de savoir les noms, les personnes et les parentés".<sup>2</sup> The fact that he possesses certain facts about a text does not however mean that the reader can appreciate the literary art of the whole; indeed, the energy spent acquiring this factual knowledge often prevents him from doing so. Another text of interest here is Valéry's preface to Alain's commentary on Charmes. "This writing in the margin," he claims, "produit on quelque sorte aux regards le complément secret du texte, leur montre la fonction du lecteur ..."<sup>3</sup> The function alluded to here would appear to be one of enabling the poem to exist, of transforming potentiality into being; the reader is after all, as we are told in the same preface, "le ressort de la puissance poétique".<sup>4</sup> Valéry claims here that his poems have no one particular meaning and that the reader is free to interpret them as he chooses, a fact which points even more forcefully to the importance of the experience which the reading of a poem can occasion. He concludes by pointing to the many different reactions to which one literary text can give rise:

Son action de présence modifie les esprits, chacun selon sa nature et son état, provoquant les combinaisons qui étaient en puissance dans telle tête; mais quelle que soit la réaction ainsi produite, le texte se retrouve inaltéré, et capable d'amorcer indéfiniment d'autres phénomènes dans une autre circonstance ou dans un autre individu.<sup>5</sup>

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1. "La Jeune Parque," commentée par Alain (1953), p. 32.
  2. Ibid., p. 33.
  3. "Charmes," commentées par Alain (1952), p. 12.
  4. Ibid., p. 16.
  5. P. Valéry, "Charmes," commentées par Alain (1952), p. 18.

However, one can but conjecture that Valéry found the ethical turn of Alain's commentaries on Charmes and La Jeune Parque disconcerting as there is certainly no directly moral content in his poetry. If he was reluctant to express his true opinion of these commentaries, others have not been slow in condemning them. André Buffard, a friend and admirer of Alain's, told me he regretted that Alain ever wrote them as they have done considerable harm to his reputation; he only did so, I learnt from the same source, to please Henri Mondor who first introduced him to Valéry. One former admirer suffered a "choc douloureux" on reading Alain's commentary on La Jeune Parque, which he unjustly describes as "un énorme contre-sens".<sup>2</sup> In other cases Alain is blamed for commenting on ideas which are his own rather than those of the author in question, and although he is seen to justify himself for so doing ("Que m'importe," he writes, "si Platon a bien pensé ce que j'y trouve, pourvu que ce que j'y trouve m'avance à comprendre quelque chose?"),<sup>3</sup> the author of the article feels bound to ask, "Mais dès lors, s'agit-il encore de critique?"<sup>4</sup> The answer is "no" if the author expects of the critic an objective analysis of the work in question. Alain's conception of the critic's task was, as we shall see, of a quite different nature. It suggests that his commentaries are more valuable when he is talking about the activity of reading and the insight to which this gives rise than when he is describing what exactly some texts evoke for him. The preface to his commentary of La Jeune Parque, where he raises general questions on the nature of poetry and the

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1. Duchesnes-Guillemain, "Gide et Alain," Synthèses No. 78 (nov. 1952), pp. 26-32.

2. Ibid.: "Poème en face du poème si l'on veut, mais qui masquait au commentateur l'œuvre que découvre tout lecteur un peu plus humble, un peu plus docile à ce qu'il lit. Alain dit, par exemple, à propos de 'Glisse, Barque funèbre ...', que c'est le seul passage où ce poème fasse allusion à la mort. Or, cette idée y est partout présente ..."

3. H.P., p. 18.

4. R. Fayolle, La Critique (1964), p. 163.

important role of the reader, is much more worthy of Alain than the commentary itself. In an earlier chapter Alain's implicit appreciation of Valéry's expressive obscurity in "Le Cimetière Marin" was mentioned and I believe that it is in comments such as the one quoted in Chapter II, inspired by his reaction to the spirit and force of the text, that Alain redeems himself as a critic.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the considerable proportion of Alain's written work which is given to reflections on works of literature, the title of literary critic ill befits him. He lays great emphasis on the act of reading itself, preferring the term "lecteur" or "liscur" to describe his activity to that of "critique littéraire" which he rarely uses except in a pejorative sense. In a dedication to the Propos de Littérature, he admits his hesitation in writing literary commentaries for fear of being labelled a critic, and at the same time declares his independence of method:

J'ai hésité beaucoup devant la beauté littéraire, vous le savez. Je veux vous dire pourquoi. Je n'aime guère les critiques, et je ne voudrais point passer pour l'un d'eux; je vois bien par ce livre, que cela m'arrivera.<sup>2</sup>

His harsh judgements of literary critics in general was no doubt influenced by those who dominated the scene in his youth, by Sainte-Beuve, Renan and Taine, "les dieux du jour",<sup>3</sup> whom he later sarcastically describes as "les trois bédoux de littérature".<sup>4</sup> He despised them for their erudite methods and for presuming to discuss literary works in terms of their own theories. Here again, as we saw in the case of Alain's attacks on a certain kind of philosophy, there is a gross oversimplification involved in his curt dismissal of these critics. It

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1. See p. 89 above.

2. Déd.M.M.-L. (1/1/1934).

3. H.P., p. 26.

4. Ibid.

seems plausible to suggest that the names of Sainte-Beuve and Taine symbolised for Alain the type of literary criticism he most despised. The exaggeratedly scientific method which, in his opinion, characterised Taine's philosophical writings<sup>1</sup> is presumably what he found distasteful about his attempts at literary criticism, and in his attacks on Taine, like the one quoted above, Alain is surely only concerned with the theoretical tag always associated with his name, that of "race, milieu et moment", which implies the evaluation of literary works according to criteria foreign, in Alain's opinion, to the concerns of art. Sainte-Beuve's name he used as a kind of personal shorthand for the type of historical and biographical criticism which again he deemed quite irrelevant to the appreciation of a literary work. Indeed, Alain considered that the disclosure of intimate details about a writer was not only irrelevant but could harm his reputation needlessly. The following lines illustrate what exactly lies behind his sweeping condemnation of Sainte-Beuve:

... aucun mort ne fut digne de ses œuvres; et c'est pourquoi les publications de lettres intimes et de médiocres aventures sont proprement impies. Comme on voit pour Chateaubriand, Musset, Balzac, Stendhal, enfin pour toutes les victimes de l'histoire des lettres. Et Sainte-Beuve a fait école, qui supposait toujours le pire, et voulait expliquer de grands effets par de petites causes. Il faut laisser mort ce qui a mérité de mourir.<sup>2</sup>

Alain's resolve not to "victimise" Stendhal by confusing Boyle the man with Stendhal the artist, and explaining "great effects" by "minor causes", will be mentioned later in this chapter.<sup>3</sup> His dislike of Sainte-Beuve's method, which consists in not separating the study of a work from the study of its author, and in interpreting the former in the light of his

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1. See p. 5 above.

2. P.R., pp. 155-6 (*Propos* II, pp. 556-557).

3. See below, p. 199.

discoveries about the latter, suggests that he shares Proust's misgivings as to the adequacy of the reasoning intelligence, functioning within the narrow confines of cause and effect, as a judge of literary works: "Mais dès que l'intelligence raisonneuse veut se mettre à juger des œuvres d'art," Proust claimed, "il n'y a rien de fixe, de certain; on peut démontrer tout ce qu'on veut."<sup>1</sup> His famous Contre Sainte-Beuve has as its main theme the inferiority of the intelligence by itself in the domain of art. It seems reasonable to suggest that for Proust also the name "Sainte-Beuve" merely stood for a certain kind of criticism whose shortcomings he was concerned to demonstrate. He himself writes:

La méthode de Sainte-Beuve n'est peut-être pas au premier abord un objet si important. Mais peut-être sera-t-on amené au cours de ces pages, à voir qu'elle touche à de très importants problèmes intellectuels, peut-être au plus grand de tous pour un artiste, à cette infériorité de l'intelligence ...<sup>2</sup>

In the opening lines of a chapter in which he attempts to show that the name "Sainte-Beuve" should not merely be associated with the notion of literary history, Jean-Bertrand Barrère writes:

Nul critique en son temps n'a été plus convaincu que Sainte-Beuve de l'influence de l'époque sur les esprits des écrivains. C'est pourquoi son nom est associé, dans la pensée simplifiée de Proust et de nos contemporains, à la notion d'histoire littéraire, comme elle pourrait l'être plus justement à celle d'une histoire des âmes de créateurs. ... Mais il n'est pas moins vrai de dire que nul critique n'a été plus soucieux que lui de dégager la vertu caractéristique d'un écrivain ...<sup>3</sup>

A closer acquaintance with Sainte-Beuve's works would doubtless have led Alain to acknowledge that at the time he was writing Saint-Beuve made some positive contributions in the field of literary criticism. The fact that Jean-Pierre Richard, whose concept of the art of literary

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1. M. Proust, A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, III. Le Temps Retrouvé (1954), p. 893.
  2. M. Proust, Contre Sainte-Beuve (1954), p. 63.
  3. J.-B. Barrère, L'Idée de Goût de Pascal à Valéry (1972), p. 145.

criticism bears considerable resemblance to Alain's own, reveals, in an article entitled "Sainte-Beuve et l'Expérience critique", a very different Sainte-Beuve, provides further evidence to support the view that Alain's Sainte-Beuve, like Proust's, is grossly oversimplified. When we read in Richard's article that Sainte-Beuve's conception of the critic's task has certain points in common with Proust's, we realise yet again that his name has been much abused:

Nul doute que pour Sainte-Beuve, comme pour la critique moderne, la littérature ne soit d'abord affaire de langage ... Les surfaces de style devront donc être longuement fréquentées et parcourues. Par la lecture, par la re-lecture ... le critique tentera d'en apprécier les pentes, les chemins, les reliefs favoris, qu'il essaiera même quelquefois d'imiter dans la figure de son propre commentaire. Sainte-Beuve diffère-t-il tellement ici de Proust, son futur grand adversaire?<sup>1</sup>

In the same dedicatory passage as that in which he voiced his fear of being considered a literary critic, Alain claims that his intention is not to judge the merit of any particular work but to talk about his experience as a reader: "... je ne m'institue nullement en juge des valeurs littéraires; simplement je fais des remarques sur des livres qui m'ont saisi."<sup>2</sup> The way in which Alain expresses himself here is, as we shall see later, significant, as it is the books which act upon his consciousness. The terms "reader" and "critic" are used by Alain to refer to two diametrically opposed approaches to literature. As we saw in the case of Alain's references to Sainte-Beuve, the term "critic" is used throughout his work to refer to the type of critic whose main concern is to judge the merit of a work according to his own conception of literary art. Towards Brunetière, who was obsessed with demonstrating his theory of the evolution of literary genres, Alain was no more indulgent than in the case

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1. J.-P. Richard, "Sainte-Beuve et l'expérience critique," Les Chemins actuels de la critique (1968), p. 119.

2. P.L. (1/1/34).



of Taine and Sainte-Beuve, and classed him alongside these "Messieurs de la Littérature" and "valets de lettres".<sup>1</sup> The term "lecteur", which Alain uses to describe his own method, can also be applied to certain modern critics whose works suggest that they share some of Alain's qualities as a "lecteur". But let us consider first what these qualities are. Alain's pre-occupation is less with any critical method, with any particular way of analysing a literary text, than with the state of mind of the reader. He values great works because of the form of intellectual experience to which they give rise quite apart from any ideas which they might happen to contain. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Alain enjoys reading Balzac, but this does not imply that he shares Balzac's political opinions. In a "propos" entitled "True and false culture" Alain gives a light-hearted account of an imaginary conversation between himself and a "Sorbonagre", his nickname for the exaggeratedly erudite academic, who is instructing him in the "science" of reading Balzac. The "propos" illustrates the distance which separates Alain from traditional methods of criticism and for this reason deserves lengthy quotation:

Comme je parlais devant un Sorbonagre, d'un roman de Balzac qui me plaît, le Sorbonagre me dit: vous vous occupez spécialement de Balzac? A quoi je répondis que je le lisais souvent et avec plaisir. "Mais, dit-il, n'en ferez-vous point un livre?" Je comprends, lui dis-je, Monsieur le Sorbonagre, qu'un livre est essentiellement quelque chose sur quoi on écrit un autre livre. Mais, je rougis de l'avouer, quand je lis un de mes auteurs préférés, je n'ai point de pensées si sérieuses; et je lis pour mon plaisir.

"Il faut, me dit-il, user au plus vite ce plaisir-là du moins si vous visez la haute culture littéraire, dont je vous crois digne. ... la culture littéraire est maintenant hautement scientifique."

"Je suis, lui dis-je, un barbare avide de culture. Instruisez-moi."

"Voilà. Avant tout ayez une méthode pour lire. On perd un temps infini à relire. Il faut qu'une lecture vide complètement un livre. ... Ayez devant vous un double repertoire; l'un selon l'ordre alphabétique ... l'autre selon les matières. ... Quand vous

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1. H.P., p. 138.

arriveriez à la fin vous pourriez dire: j'ai lu Balzac. Dans la suite vous n'aurez à relire que vos fiches. ... Laissez passer encore dix ans, et l'on ne se moquera plus de la critique littéraire; on saura Montaigne ou Balzac comme on sait maintenant la physique."

... Hélas! Je m'échauffe encore en lisant Jean-Jacques. Quand sortirai-je de l'enfance? Selon mon opinion le bonheur d'admirer est ce qui éclaire une lecture et ce qui enlève le lecteur ...<sup>1</sup>

Many of these remarks directed against traditional methods of literary criticism could also be interpreted today as attacking the methods of some modern critics, for they too are "highly scientific", if in a different way. The attraction of the linguistic model for many structuralist critics anxious to abandon literary history and biographical criticism was that it enabled them to be rigorous and systematic without having recourse to methods involving causal explanation. The fact that an element could be explained by its place in a network of relations rather than in a chain of cause and effect suggested to these critics that literary criticism could remain a scientific discipline. However, it is surely merely a prejudice that criticism should be scientific, and Alain would doubtless have considered the practices of some of today's critics, Jakobson's distributional analyses for instance, as absurd as the method of the "Sorbonne" outlined in the above "propos". The critic's starting point should, he deemed, be his reaction to a given text, not the application of his own interpretative method. After demonstrating the "irrelevance" of Jakobson's preoccupation with numerical symmetry<sup>2</sup> in poetry, one modern critic concludes:

It is only by starting with the effects of a poem and attempting to see how grammatical structures contribute to and help to account for those effects that one can avoid the mistakes which result if one thinks of grammatical analysis as an interpretive method.<sup>3</sup>

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1. *P. Est.* pp. 24-26 (*Propos II*, pp. 180-82).

2. J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), p. 60.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

For the critic who can only read a text through his own structural, psycho-analytical or sociological concepts the activity of reading is no longer a pleasurable experience but an academic exercise, in the pejorative sense.

The setting in opposition in the above passage of two moods, intellectual detachment and emotional involvement, suggests that the reading method which Alain is advocating should be assessed in terms of the reader's experience. Alain did in fact write a book on Balzac, although not the book the Sorbonagre may have hoped for, and of it he remarked, "Il ... est fait pour mes frères universitaires qui n'ont plus rien à dire sur rien."<sup>1</sup> The said book opens with a chapter significantly entitled "Bonheur de lire"<sup>2</sup> and contains a fitting reply to the pretensions of the Sorbonagre. Commenting on his facility for reading, Alain writes, "... cela m'a donné d'immenses avantages sur ceux qui ne savent qu'apprendre."<sup>3</sup> This claim points to the rigid distinction which exists in his own mind between the activities of reading for its own sake and reading in order to gain factual information, activities which belong to very different areas of experience. For the Sorbonagre and those he represents, among whom no doubt figures the "poor reader" of Valéry's La Jeune Parque anxious to know what the poem is about,<sup>4</sup> a novel of Balzac's offers a story with a beginning and an end, together with many precious facts which, if coherently reconstructed with the help of index-cards, present a picture of the world in which Balzac's characters lived. The ideal novel for such a reader would in Alain's eyes be a bad one; for

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1. Dés.M.M.-I., <sup>A.D.</sup> p. xli.

2. A.B., p. 931.

3. Ibid.

4. "La Jeune Parque." commentée par Alain (1953), p. 32.

him the experience of involvement is much more valuable than the experience of having his intellectual curiosity finally satisfied:

Toujours est-il que les mauvais romans me semblent des abrégés, des faits, des renseignements, tout ce qu'il faut pour comprendre la suite; ce que je voudrais c'est désirer de savoir ce qui arrivera, et non pas tant de comprendre ...<sup>1</sup>

The reading of a novel, then, far from being a means to an end, is for Alain an experience to be lived for itself. Commenting on this same book he once wrote to a friend: "J'ai tenté avec mon Balzac d'esquisser la position d'une critique littéraire neuve et supérieure ...,"<sup>2</sup> a remark which justifies perhaps a comparison of Alain's view of criticism to one which has recently been formulated by Roland Barthes,<sup>3</sup> namely that the critic could fruitfully dwell on the pleasure experienced by the reader, and on the theory of the practice of reading. Another modern critic, Jonathan Culler, has suggested that if structuralism were to develop an aesthetics based on the pleasure of the reader this would lead to the destruction of various myths of literature:

We would no longer need to make organic unity a standard of value but might allow it to function simply as a hypothesis of reading, for we would be more aware that our pleasure often comes from the fragment, the incongruous detail, the charming excess of certain descriptions and elaborations, the well-constructed sentence whose elegance exceeds its function, or the flaws in a grand design.<sup>4</sup>

Some of Alain's criteria of criticism discussed in previous chapters suggest that for him also the effect of the text on the reader should be the critic's starting point for any discussion of that text. Roland Barthes' own book on Balzac, S/Z, designed to show that literary studies should

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1. A.B., pp. 933-4.

2. Bulletin 19 (B.A.A.A.), p. 4: Letter to Jean Schlumberger.

3. R. Barthes, Le Plaisir du Texte (1973), p. 94: "Imaginer une esthétique ... fondée jusqu'au bout ... sur le plaisir du consommateur ... les conséquences seraient énormes ..."

4. J. Culler, Structuralist Poetics (1975), p. 263.

make of the reader "non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte",<sup>1</sup> and that the reader's task is not to re-constitute the message of the work but to respond to its plurality,<sup>2</sup> is more in keeping with Alain's views on criticism than the reading method advocated by the Sorbonagre.

Avec Balzac, Alain's attempt at a "new and superior form of literary criticism",<sup>3</sup> appears to be no more than a collection of random reflections inspired by a reading method of a quite different order from that proposed by the Sorbonagre, but this is precisely where the originality of the book lies. One does not order one's thoughts in a logical fashion while reading a novel, and in order to capture the authenticity of the experience Alain therefore declines to do so while relating his encounters with Balzac's works. "Et pourquoi résumer, choisir, souligner, quand l'auteur a dit, comme je crois, exactement ce qu'il voulait dire?" he asks, and adds, "Toutefois des expériences de hasard m'ont fait concevoir ce que pourrait être la Critique véritable."<sup>4</sup> He realised that a reader could, and often did, derive aesthetic satisfaction from a text which he was incapable of analysing or indeed understanding. Commenting on Une Ténébreuse Affaire, he writes:

L'unité du ton et le retour au noir y sont tellement menagés que, lorsqu'on le lit d'abord sans comprendre, comme il m'est arrivé, eh bien, même alors, la perception de l'ensemble est juste.<sup>5</sup>

We are reminded here of Alain's criticism of Mme de Staël's Corinne, mentioned in the last chapter.<sup>6</sup> Her shortcoming is to explain everything,

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1. R. Barthes, S/Z (1970), p.10.

2. Ibid., p. 18.

3. See p. 195 above.

4. A.B., p. 940.

5. Ibid., p. 947.

6. See p. 162 above.

leaving no element of unpredictability and no incongruous details to delight the reader's sensibility. To be truly cultured, Alain believed, is to be able to respond to other demands than those of the reason alone. He argues that familiarity with a text enables the reader to appreciate it when a more understanding of it cannot:

Rousseau a bien su qu'il faut lire les bons auteurs sans jamais leur faire objection. J'ai trouvé plus; j'ai trouvé qu'il ne faut pas tant s'efforcer de les comprendre, que d'être bien familiers avec ce qu'ils disent; et cette méthode de lire permet aussi le repos du jugement qui s'exerce alors par éclairs, pour se retirer aussitôt dans une sorte de sommeil.<sup>1</sup>

The act of suspending one's judgement and leaving one's thoughts unmarshalled can be the prelude to certain privileged moments of insight and intuitive understanding. This state of mental relaxation, which Alain considers an indispensable preparation to all forms of intellectual activity, favours the appreciation of literature, whereas a state of tension in which "les raisonnements se nouent"<sup>2</sup> can only hinder it. Bachelard appears to have suffered the ill effects of such tension before discovering the art of reading. In 1959 he wrote in a letter to Pierre-Jean Jouve:

J'ai votre Pauline. J'avais dû lire ce livre jadis. Mais il y a trente ans savais-je lire? J'étais dans la tension des pensées sur la science ... Mais depuis la poésie m'a touché — ... Que de pensées, que de pensées songes. Comme elle nous aide à aller au fond de la nuit humaine.<sup>3</sup>

Kent, for his part, was apparently incapable of appreciating Rousseau because he read him in too analytical a manner. "L'illustre Kent," Alain writes, "a dit de Jean-Jacques Rousseau à peu près ceci:

"Quand je le lissais, j'étais comme incapable de juger, par l'effet d'une émotion souveraine, dont je n'ai jamais été tout à fait le maître, quoique je m'appliquasse à la dompter par des lectures répétées."

This judgement, comments Alain, "est d'un prodigieux constructeur d'idées

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1. H.P., p. 142.

2. Ibid., p. 141.

3. Le Monde, 9/vi/1972.



dont aucun penseur n'a pu encore prendre la mesure. Ce génie a épelé Jean-Jacques. C'est assez pour faire voir que Jean-Jacques n'a pas été loué comme il fallait."<sup>1</sup> For Alain, to have mastered the art of reading was to be able to appreciate the experience of these same precious moments when judgement is lying dormant. A certain awareness of the immediate world before conceptualisation is presented by him as being not only beneficial to the reader but as a necessary stage in the process of composition also. Of his writing method Alain once wrote:

Ce monde encore dans le chaos me pénétrait de bonheur. Je n'étais pas pressé de le construire et de me séparer de lui. En même temps j'éprouvais la présence intime du sujet que je me donnais; les deux ne faisaient qu'un. Je suis assuré maintenant que cet état de repos, qui quelquefois ne dure qu'une seconde, est un des moments de ce qu'on nomme le travail.<sup>2</sup>

Although he is thinking here of the writer in particular, the "bonheur" experienced by the reader during this "repos du jugement",<sup>3</sup> and which Kant seems to have been incapable of experiencing, is of the same nature. The fact that for Kant no knowledge was possible outside science confirms the continuity in Alain's philosophical and "reading" attitudes, to which we will return later in this chapter.

But before being able to achieve such a harmonious state and to identify with the work in question, the reader must first, Alain claims, adopt a non-critical and admiring attitude to the great classics of literature, and in this he sets an example. The admiration and respect he shows for the authors he discusses distinguishes him from other critics whose only concern is too often to denigrate and criticise. This does not however mean that Alain admired every work that had already achieved

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1. Prolog II, p. 188.

2. H.P., pp. 141-2.

3. Ibid., p. 142.

a certain acclaim; if such a book inspired in him only negative reactions, he refrained from commenting. His own rule, which he proudly claimed to be "à cent lieues de la méthode sorbonnique",<sup>1</sup> was never to make an unfavourable judgement but to consider the author in question as "un fait humain considérable".<sup>2</sup> Alain rarely comments on Stendhal's works which are of an autobiographical or intimate nature, such as Amance. He was interested not in Bayle the man but in Stendhal the artist, and there was a side of Bayle's nature which he considered unworthy of the artist with lofty ideals he so much admired in Stendhal. As Judith Robinson observes, there are for Alain two Stendhals:

Il y a d'une part la nature un peu mesquine et même un peu grossière qui apparaît de temps en temps dans les écrits autobiographiques de Bayle ... Et il y a d'autre part le Stendhal du Rouge et le Noir, de la Chartreuse de Parme, de l'Abbesse de Castro, l'auteur qui a été à tant d'égards infiniment plus noble que l'homme, infiniment plus digne de notre vénération.<sup>3</sup>

As it was this latter Stendhal whom Alain admired, he chose to ignore the works which reflected the preoccupations of the infinitely less noble Bayle. He entertained nothing but scorn for critics who were interested above all in the intimate details of the lives of the authors they were studying:

Je dis aussi que la curiosité historique, à l'égard d'un auteur, est une espèce d'injustice. Car on veut les connaître souvent afin de comparer ce qu'ils écrivent avec leur nature et avec leurs actions; comme ceux qui fouillent dans les lettres intimes. Si l'auteur écrivait sa pauvre petite histoire il ferait de méchants livres.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Balzac, it is the works which reflect his interest in the supernatural and the occult which Alain chooses to ignore. The world of the supernatural was for him nothing other than a product of the ill-

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1. H.P., p. 176.

2. Ibid.

3. Judith Robinson, Alain Lecteur de Balzac et de Stendhal (1958), p. 69.

4. P.Hyt., p. 38 (Propos II, p. 244).

employed imagination, which Alain considered to be a "maîtresse d'erreurs" when not engaged in any external activity,<sup>1</sup> and for this reason it was certainly not worthy of the reader's attention. As he admired the majority of Balzac's novels for their stark realism, Alain did not wish to cast a cloud over his reputation by making unfavourable comments on novels like Séraphita and Louis Lambert, unrepresentative of the Comédie Humaine as a whole.

The cult of Humanity which manifests itself in Alain's respectful and reverent attitude to all great works, necessarily great if they have survived the discerning minds in the intervening years and are now read in a mood of common approval,<sup>2</sup> inspires the "bonheur d'admirer" whose prerogative, Alain tells the Sorbonogre, is to uplift the reader. As is so often the case with one who is anxious to show the beneficial effects of any intellectual activity which he recommends, this attitude is as valuable to him who adopts it as it is to humanity as a whole. Alain's definition of the word "admiration" shows it to have this double virtue: "Le principal de l'admiration est qu'elle nous dispose favorablement par rapport à l'espèce humaine et à nous même."<sup>3</sup> This approach therefore helps to reduce tension and so increases the receptivity of the reader. In his belief that a child should be encouraged to adopt an almost reverent attitude to great works of literature and thus be initiated to true culture, Alain went so far as to say that the enjoyment of a book was more important than the understanding of it:

Or, dès que nous nous approchons des pensées réelles, nous sommes tous soumis à cette condition de recevoir d'abord sans comprendre,

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1. S.B.A., p. 222.

2. See below, p. 204-5.

3. Déf., p. 1028.

et par une sorte de piété. Lire, c'est le vrai culte, et le mot culture nous en avertit. L'opinion, l'exemple, la rumeur de la gloire nous disposent comme il faut. Mais la beauté encore mieux. C'est pourquoi je suis bien loin de croire que l'enfant doive comprendre tout ce qu'il lit et récite.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding, it would seem, is only of secondary importance for Alain when he is absorbed in his reading; access to the "pensées réelles" contained in great works could, he believed, only be won through a submissive and unanalytical approach.

Since the same principle of admiration inspired the writings of some other critics of the day, Alain's attempt to break with traditional methods of criticism was not an isolated one. After claiming, in the dedication to the Propos de littérature quoted from earlier,<sup>2</sup> that his intention is to inspire in his readers a certain attitude to literature, Alain recommends that they should re-read their favourite authors so as to "rekindle"<sup>3</sup> their feelings of admiration. He was not alone in his day in advocating such an approach but shared the company of Charles du Bos and André Suarès, the latter of whom once wrote, "Le meilleur critique est celui qui nous donne la plus d'occasions d'admirer."<sup>4</sup> The following maxim which Alain borrowed from Auguste Comte suggests that for him the analytical faculties of the reader should only come into play after he has experienced an initial identification with the text: "L'intelligence doit suivre la foi et non la précéder ni la rompre."<sup>5</sup> Alain confesses that he was in fact reluctant to adopt such a maxim, on the face of it blatant

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1. P.Ed., p. 25 (Propos II, pp. 337-8).

2. See p. 188 above.

3. Déd.M.M.-L. (1/1/1934).

4. A. Suarès, Xénies (1923), p. 224: "Pour comprendre il est nécessaire d'aimer" (p. 247) is another dictum suggestive of Alain's reading method.

5. P.L., p. 65.

irrationalism, but was forced to acknowledge the important part it played in the development of his ideas on the classics of literature and literary criticism: "J'ai pris moi-même cette maxime par contagion, quoi qu'elle ne me plût guère; elle m'a conduit plus loin qu'aucune autre ..." <sup>1</sup> An almost identical remark in another "propos" suggests yet again that the approach Alain is advocating is a non-critical one: "le feu de l'admiration est plus nécessaire que l'intelligence, et la critique est un ingrat métier." <sup>2</sup> These words occur in a "propos" in which Alain is criticising Sainte-Beuve's method, a fact which leaves us in no doubt as to the form of criticism he is attacking. According to Alain, the ideal reader should approach a literary text in a state of "indifference" and should surrender himself to the "power" of the text:

Il n'y a que le critique qui approuve ou blâme en lisant; le lecteur se trouve placé à un point de pur spectacle et d'indifférence; telle est la puissance sur lui des grandes œuvres. Il n'y a plus ici le mauvais et le bon, l'intéressant et l'ennuyeux; mais tout participe à l'existence, comme dans un monde. <sup>3</sup>

By recommending "indifference" on the part of the reader, Alain means that a desire to submit the work to his own codes of interpretation should give way to a receptive state of mind, characterised by its indifference to any considerations which entail a deviation from the work itself. A modern critic, or "reader" whom Alain would doubtless have been pleased to defend because of the importance he attaches to the experience undergone by the reader, is Georges Poulet. For him,

La critique est une expérience surgissant d'une autre expérience. ... Employant ce mot ... dans le sens d'expérience vécue, d'Erlebnis, je dirai que l'expérience est ce que j'éprouve, ce qui est ressenti par moi comme formant sur le moment le contenu de mon existence. Or

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1. PL., p. 65.

2. P.R., p. 156 (Propos II, p. 557).

3. P.L., p. 157.

la critique a cette particularité extraordinaire de constituer une expérience personnelle reprenant ou prolongant l'expérience d'autrui.<sup>1</sup>

Poulet's "criticism of identification", the term he applies to the form of criticism in which the reader is not concerned to stand back from the work and judge it, but rather to let it act upon his consciousness, has indeed many points in common with Alain's view of what criticism should be. One modern critic, seeing the value of what Poulet calls "une critique d'identification", considers that the force inherent in a work, which for him is connected with its power to create expressive ambiguity, should not be neglected in favour of formal structures alone.<sup>2</sup> Professor Alexander believes, with Alain and Georges Poulet, that the reader must participate in the creation of meaning. Claiming that "form is never wholly adequate to sense and meaning", he writes:

To reach the latter one must penetrate through the structures and enter by a type of sympathy into the life of the work ...<sup>3</sup>

The critical writings born of these experiences of identification with a text are almost works of art in their own right.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the criticism of Charles du Bos and Jacques Rivière, Georges Poulet writes:

Pour la première fois apparaît en France une pensée critique qui n'est plus informatrice, judicatrice, biographique ou impressionniste, qui se veut le duplicata spirituel de l'œuvre étudiée, la transposition intégrale d'un univers de l'esprit à l'intérieur d'un autre esprit.<sup>5</sup>

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1. G. Poulet, "Conclusion," Les Chemins Actuels de la Critique (1968), p. 275.

4. Les Chemins actuels de la Critique, p. 301. Choix bibliographique, Dominique Noguez. Discussing the thematic criticism of critics like Georges Poulet and J.-P. Richard, he writes: "L'application d'une méthode souvent rigoureuse aux œuvres les plus diverses n'empêche pas ces œuvres critiques, généralement remarquables par la qualité de leur écriture, d'être des œuvres tout court."

2. I.W. Alexander, Constant: Adolphe, Studies in French Literature 24 (1973), p. 21

3. Ibid.

5. G. Poulet, "Une Critique d'Identification," op. cit., p. 9.



Alain's commentaries have however been described in a way which suggests that they too are sometimes works of art in themselves. Colette Audry describes his criticism as realising at times "une sorte de transsubstantiation de l'œuvre".<sup>1</sup> The London fog and the colour of the Thames are, she claims, as much features of Alain's commentary on Dickens, which secretes a Dickensian atmosphere, as of Dickens' novels themselves. Colette Audry recognises however that Alain's criticism does not always assume such a form. But even if, at times, he does not achieve the kind of criticism which those of us acquainted with his view of the critic's task have a right to expect — I am thinking here in particular of his commentaries on Valéry's poems which sometimes give a false impression of the potential of his criticism — this aspect of Alain's work deserves the attention of anyone interested in the development of French literary criticism. Alain steers his way between the excesses of both traditional and modern literary criticism and long before Mikel Dufrenne wrote, "Laisser être l'œuvre, telle est finalement la tâche du critique,"<sup>2</sup> was advocating just such an approach.

Purely personal taste does not, for Alain, form a valid criterion in matters of literary judgement: "Je ne donnerais pas mon goût personnel comme règle," he modestly assures us, and continues, "et, autant que je sais, nul n'est bon juge ... Mais pris ensembles, les hommes sont de bons juges."<sup>3</sup> Writing in a "propos" on the subject of judgement, and again

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1. Colette Audry, "Alain et le roman," R.M.M. (avril-juin 1952), pp. 243-254 (p. 246): Il y avait aussi chez Alain de quoi faire un vrai critique littéraire ... le critique littéraire de race ... est celui qui sent l'œuvre comme un objet de nature; par un contact direct, mais mûrement exercé, il lui découvre un grain, un timbre, un lustre, une couleur propres, qu'il s'efforce à restituer en formules elles-mêmes émouvantes et belles."

2. M. Dufrenne, "Critique littéraire et phénoménologie," Esthétique et Philosophie (1967), p. 158 (article first published in the Revue Internationale de Philosophie, Bruxelles, 1964, 68).

3. P.L., p. 124.

laying emphasis on the value of humanity as judge, Alain opposes the concept of communal taste to that of truth and in so doing reveals that for him taste is superior to the form of judgement which discerns between good and bad, right and wrong:

On ne voudrait point qu'il soit parlé de goût, lorsqu'il s'agit de vérité. Mais cette recherche de l'évidence sans aucun égard à l'autorité est peut-être toute la sottise.<sup>1</sup>

Alain reserves the term "taste" to refer to the judgement of the whole mind before the habit of discursive reasoning upsets the balance and attempts to legislate according to arbitrary values: "Nous sentons qu'il ne peut y avoir d'erreur dans un beau poème," he writes, "et c'est ainsi, selon notre nature terrestre, qu'il faut que le goût précède le jugement."<sup>2</sup> For Alain, a man of taste is therefore one who keeps his faculties united and who exercises both his reason and his sensibility in the creation or appreciation of a work of art; he is someone who knows how to read. This conception is strikingly similar to Valéry's idea of great art as being that which demands that both the artist and the amateur of his work exercise all their faculties; it is "l'art qui exige que toutes les facultés d'un homme s'y emploient."<sup>3</sup> The prose poem "L'Amateur de Poèmes" in which Valéry is meditating on the therapeutic value of art, which offers a means of experiencing the beneficial effects of the feeling of wholeness and a simultaneous awareness of infinite potential, echoes many of Alain's ideas. It suggests that his "bonheur de lire" results from an experience of the same mental state, achieved when the mind is not torn within itself by the conflicting demands of its different faculties. The following lines, which form the conclusion to Valéry's

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1. P.L., p. 70.

2. V.L., p. 52.

3. P. Valéry, Pièces sur l'Art, Ouvres II, p. 1219.

prose poem, point to the capacity of poetry to compensate for the fragmentary nature of thought when it is not regulated by anything existing outside the mind:

... Cette mesure qui me transporte et que je colore, me garde du vrai et du faux. Ni le doute ne me divise, ni la raison ne me travaille, nul hasard, mais une chance extraordinaire se fortifie. Je trouve sans effort le langage de ce bonheur; et je pense par artifice, une pensée toute certaine, merveilleusement prévoyante, — aux lacunes calculées, sans ténèbres involontaires, dont le mouvement me commande et la qualité me comble: une pensée singulièrement achevée.<sup>1</sup>

The 'Borbonagres' and other pedants of his day Alain deemed to be incapable of experiencing the "bonheur de lire". Having defined their ideas<sup>2</sup> they were caught up in their own formulas, and, bent on distinguishing the true from the false, no longer knew how to read. For those, however, who approach a literary text in a receptive state of mind and are not merely seeking in it a testing ground for their own ideas, the act of reading can only be beneficial: "Heureux celui qui sait lire et relire. Heureux, et utile aux autres, parce qu'il est capable de leur dénouer l'esprit en quelque sorte; car la pensée est très mauvaise en cage, j'entends si elle se tourne dans un petit cercle, s'empêtre et s'étrange dans les mêmes formules ..." <sup>3</sup>

In a recent discussion<sup>4</sup> about the aims and methods of the teaching of literature it was suggested that philosophers tend not to take literary studies very seriously because the latter too often concentrate on trivial

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1. P. Valéry, *Ouvres I* (1957), pp. 94-5.

2. *Propos II*, pp. 235-6: "Or il y a des esprits vieillies, aigris, rhumatisants, époumonés; quelques-uns ont su lire, et puis se sont fatigués, ont pris un parti, ont défini leurs idées, et n'y changeraient pas une virgule ..."

3. *Propos II*, p. 235.

4. *L'Enseignement de la Littérature* (Centre Culturel de Cérisy-la-Salle, 22 au 29 juillet 1969)(1971), pp. 401-422: Michel Deguy, "Enseignement — Philosophie — Poésie".

and inessential detail. "Le sérieux ultime," it was claimed,

en climat d'urgence où cette pensée menacée par la mort sait que l'interruption la guette, exige une connaissance différente d'un savoir, que les précautions et préambules et obliquités du didactisme littéraire ignore ou ajourne.<sup>1</sup>

"Une connaissance différente d'un savoir", to which reference is made here, is precisely what Alain is seeking in his reading. Contrasting philosophy to the "vain obliquités of literary didacticism", the author of the article in question quotes Alain: "La philosophie désire répondre à l'inquiétude de l'urgent, du décisif, de l'unique nécessaire, de l'essentiel (de ce qu'Alain appelait encore le salut) ..." <sup>2</sup> The reference here is to the opening line of Alain's Introduction to Les Dieux; it reads, "Un homme qui philosophait de la bonne manière, c'est-à-dire pour son propre salut ..." <sup>3</sup> "Salvation", the ensuing text leads us to believe, of a much more specific nature than that implied by M. Deguy when he quotes Alain's remark in such a general context. Describing the experience of this model philosopher, Alain refers to him as having known "le bonheur d'avoir surpris notre connaissance en son premier état", <sup>4</sup> a remark which suggests that Alain is talking here of salvation from the intellectual dishonesty which the sin of drawing premature conclusions implies. Stressing that the value of literary experience can only be assessed in terms of the state of mind which it induces, Alain speaks of the poet similarly as a bringer of "salvation": "il n'y a point de vérité qui nous intéresse hors de notre salut. Telle est la voie du poète." <sup>5</sup> Here again Alain is claiming that the "truth" which men should seek does not dwell in the

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1. M. Deguy, "Enseignement — Philosophie — Poésie," loc. cit., pp. 402-3.

2. Ibid., p. 402.

3. Ibid., p. 1203.

4. L.O., p. 1203.

5. P.L., p. 151.

realm of abstract ideas, as the "marchands de vérité" believe, but in the realm of intellectual experience.

If we consider Valéry's claim that the only benefit to be derived from a philosophical text must be seen in terms of an aesthetic experience, the absurdity of separating the function of philosopher and poet becomes apparent. Of the philosopher Valéry once wrote, "Celui-ci communique une sorte de plaisir esthétique,"<sup>1</sup> and the reading of philosophy he described as being an enjoyable mental exercise: "De quel œil lisons-nous les philosophes, et qui les consulte avec l'espoir véritable d'y trouver autre chose qu'une jouissance ou qu'un exercice de son esprit?"<sup>2</sup> However, we know that Valéry was interested in what he calls "la philosophie à l'état naissant". "Les philosophes," he once wrote, "nous cachent la philosophie à l'état naissant, et c'est cela seul qui au fond m'intéresse."<sup>3</sup> A glance at some of Valéry's anti-philosophical sayings suggests that he, like Alain, is only opposed to a certain superficial type of philosophy—that practised by those philosophers who conclude prematurely from what is given in experience, who "explain" the world but do not "exploit" it.<sup>4</sup> Kant, for example, Valéry considered a "great psychologist", "un homme doué pour arrêter et saisir au vol ou percevoir dans leur indépendance instantanée, des moments précieux de la pensée",<sup>5</sup> but by constructing a philosophical system out of his observations

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1. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. Judith Robinson (1973), p. 512.

2. P. Valéry, Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci, Ouvres I (1957), p. 1250: "Léonard et les philosophes." In the Cahiers I, p. 579, Valéry goes so far as to call philosophy "un genre littéraire particulier".

3. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. cit., p. 537; cf. Inspirations Méditerranéennes, Ouvres I, p. 1093.

4. See p. 184 above.

5. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. cit., p. 537.

and formalising them he prevented himself from exploring them further. Elsewhere in his Cahiers Valéry makes explicit his admiration for Kant and his belief that he was only mistaken in his method:

Kant, si admirable -- n'a pas donné la vraie méthode qui consisterait à substituer aux dires ordinaires des philosophes, les expériences intérieures réelles, dont les résultats sont philosophie.<sup>1</sup>

Valéry considered it was the business of poetry to explore these "real inner experiences" which constitute "la philosophie à l'état naissant", a stage in mental activity on which philosophers themselves are too often incapable of dwelling in their haste to systematise and construct, and I think that this, basically, is the explanation of Alain's admiration for him.

To attach to Valéry and Alain the respective labels of "poet" and "philosopher" is very misleading for they share the privilege of not corresponding to either of these narrow categories. Alain, "le philosophe-poète", is looked down upon by more rigorous philosophers for being unsystematic and deliberately obscure, and Valéry, for his part, is aware of the potentially "philosophical" content of much of his writing. On one occasion, when meditating on the fusion of the individual with the universal, on the "moi universel", he apologises for letting himself be carried away: "Je m'excuse, je me suis laissé entraîner... mais n'allez pas croire que ce soit là de la 'philosophie'... Je n'ai pas l'honneur d'être philosophe..."<sup>2</sup> However, Valéry's notion of the "moi pur" has nevertheless been compared by one critic to the philosopher's notion of the transcendental ego.<sup>3</sup> A contemporary of Alain's went so far as to

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1. P. Valéry, Cahiers I, ed. Judith Robinson (1973), p. 495.

2. P. Valéry, Inspirations Méditerranéennes, Ouvrages I (1957), p. 1092.

3. J. Derrida, "Les sources de Valéry," M.L.N. (May 1972), p. 570.



claim that Alain considered Valéry "the only philosopher living" because of his Monsieur Teste and Introduction à la Méthode de Léonard de Vinci: "... il le considérerait comme le seul philosophe vivant à cause de 'Teste' et de 'Léonard', c'est à dire des découvertes les plus étendues qui aient jamais été faites sur les ressorts du mécanisme intellectuel ..."<sup>1</sup> It is Valéry himself who shows us the way out of this dilemma when he claims that a "thinker" should not be classified as a "poet" or "philosopher" because of the subject matter of his thoughts:

Penseur! Ce nom ridicule - - Pourtant il est possible de trouver un homme, ni philosophe ni poète, non définissable par l'objet de sa pensée, ni par la recherche d'un résultat extérieur, livre, doctrine, science, vérité, mais qui soit penseur comme on est danseur, et usant de son esprit comme celui-ci de ses muscles et nerfs ...<sup>2</sup>

The very form Alain's thought assumes, its unsystematic and apparently spontaneous presentation, suggests that, according to Valéry's criterion, he "cannot be defined by the object of his thought" and is therefore neither a poet nor a philosopher but a "penseur", for whom the act of thinking takes precedence over what the process achieves.

In an earlier chapter we saw that, although there are differences in their interpretation of the mental activity leading to "inspiration" and "composition", Valéry and Alain have a common conception of art and the artist's activity, which they often compare to that of a craftsman. "Le mot art a d'abord signifié manière de faire,"<sup>3</sup> Valéry reminds us in one of his Cours de poésie, and the same concern to restore its original meaning to the word "art" lies behind Alain's thinking on the subject

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1. L. Fabre, "L'Archipel fortuné," N.R.F. (1952: Hommage à Alain), p. 222.

2. Cahiers I, ed. Judith Robinson (1973), p. 334.

3. Cours de poésie, Yagdrasill, <sup>2ème année, no. 4.</sup> (25/xii/37), p. 153.

of aesthetics. One famous "propos" opens with the words, "Si j'avais à traiter de l'art, j'insisterais sur ceci que l'art est une manière de faire, non une manière de penser;"<sup>1</sup> and later in the same "propos" Alain's conception of art is succinctly formulated: "L'art, finalement, est une action qui fait pensée."<sup>2</sup> His Système des Beaux-Arts, first published in 1920, was recognised by one critic as constituting a criticism of the expressionist theory of art, according to which art is no more than the expression of the subjective inner states of the artist. But in spite of Alain's acknowledged originality, it is more often Valéry who is considered responsible for renewing aesthetics in France in the years following the First World War. It would however be a mistake to leave Alain in Valéry's shadow because of the better reputation enjoyed by Valéry today and because of Alain's own extravagant praise of the poet whom he once dubbed "la mère de toutes les pensées".<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in a sense Alain went further than Valéry as the different orientation of his thought meant that he was aware of the implications of aesthetics for philosophy. The subjective theory of knowledge which treats of works of the human mind as if they were mere expressions of the knowing subject was as unacceptable to Alain in the domain of philosophy as the expressionist theory in the domain of art. Alain considered that the philosopher, like the artist, should only think through his medium, through existing works of art and philosophy, and that his work should thus be born out of contact with ideas already in existence in what Karl Popper would call "world three",<sup>4</sup> the world which is the product of human

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1. Propos I, p. 1289.

2. Ibid., p. 1290.

3. H.F., p. 152.

4. K. Popper, Unended Quest: an Intellectual Autobiography (1976), p. 186.

activity creatively interacting on itself. Because Alain realized the implications of aesthetics in the field of knowledge, his conviction that existing form precedes and creates thought spread to all domains.

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## C O N C L U S I O N

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## CONCLUSION

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It is generally recognised that Alain helped to revolutionise aesthetics in France after the First World War, but not all his critics have appreciated the fact that where he went further than most thinkers of his day was in his belief that the aesthetic, far from being a special emotion, was central to the mind and a source of knowledge. One critic, aware of the importance of the aesthetic for Alain, qualifies his philosophy in the following way:

... attitude plus que doctrine, attitude toute faite de compréhension et d'amour, exempte de dogmatisme aussi bien que de mysticisme, attitude humaniste, et, pour tout dire, esthétique.<sup>1</sup>

It is this "aesthetic" attitude which I consider the most rewarding aspect of Alain's thought, and my study has, I hope, illustrated the validity of his approach which has little in common with what is popularly believed to be the sole guarantor of knowledge, namely the scientific method. The aesthetic attitude led Alain to question the status of analysis and of theories and it is, I believe, in his awareness of the reality of the aesthetic and its centrality to mind that Alain is most original and at the same time has most to offer an age which, in its disregard for all but scientific progress, is losing all sense of proportion.

The tone and spirit of Alain's thought, and its relevance to today's intellectual climate, have not, however, always been appreciated. Reviewing a recent translation of Les Dieux, John Weightman wrote of Alain, "... it pains me to have to admit that I now find his tone a little out of

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1. I.W. Alexander, "Le relatif et l'actuel. En marge des pensées d'Alain," Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Etranger (nov.-déc. 1937), p. 186.

of date, a little too "brave" in the old-fashioned humanistic way."<sup>1</sup>

This critic finds Alain unrealistic in what he considers to be his excessive optimism, and believes with Sartre, who apparently avoided Alain's classes for fear of being influenced by him, that Alain does not have an adequate sense of evil. It is my belief, however, that Alain's optimism is not an unrealistic, sentimental value of wishful thinking, but a "biological" value created by life and experience without always being consciously appreciated. Here yet again Alain's thought can be fruitfully compared to that of Karl Popper for whom beneficial growth derives from interaction with the world of things and ideas by virtue of problem-solving.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it is that for Alain anything that offers problems to be solved, or invites challenge or in any way stimulates the mind, is a source of value, even if it is not consciously appreciated as such. The "bonheur" to which frequent reference has been made throughout these pages, and which Alain experienced in the intellectual pursuits he found most satisfying, particularly in processes related to literature, can therefore be described as a "biological" value with meaning for the organism. We can say then that Alain derives happiness from literature not because of the nature of the subjective experiences to which it gives rise, but because for him literature is a source of knowledge whose repercussions on the mind bring critical consciousness into play.

Those who consider Alain old-fashioned will perhaps be surprised to discover that his works do not lend support to the traditional humanistic defence of literary education, according to which "we do not learn about literature and how to read it but about the world and how to interpret it".<sup>3</sup>

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1. J. Weightman, "Father in thought," The Observer, 22/vi/1975.

2. K. Popper, Unended Quest: an Intellectual Autobiography (1976), p. 194.

3. J. Culler, Structuralist Poetics (1975), p. vii.



For Alain, on the contrary, literature is an independent mode of knowledge and in his literary commentaries we learn more about literature and how to read it than about the world and how to interpret it. This fact in itself suggests that Alain's works foreshadow many recent developments in literature and in language studies and that those who consider him old-fashioned are basing their judgement on a superficial acquaintance with his thought. By claiming that writing was not merely an instrument for recording and repeating what the mind had already thought out, but that it could be a way of exploring reality creatively, Alain was standing out against the "realist" doctrine as misconceived. Indeed, his works appear to focus a current which, from Baudelaire through Mallarmé to Valéry, has become the most fruitful modern heritage. Like these poets, he considered that the creative writer should use language as language, not as mock-reality, and that he should explore the world through the reality embodied in language itself. He believed, furthermore, that the writer should not systematise and explain the world but that he should recreate in language the unpredictable and inexplicable nature of the reality we live. It is here, in his appreciation of the "expressive ambiguity" of literature, that Alain makes his own and gives philosophical weight to the experience of language guaranteed by Mallarmé and Valéry, and which has proved central to the direction in which literature and language studies have been moving ever since. Similarly, Alain considers that reading should not be regarded as a means of acquiring factual information, but as an experience which enables the reader to apprehend the subjective truths embodied in literature. The emphasis in Alain's literary commentaries is laid, contrary to what one might expect from one who is still considered an "old-fashioned humanist", on the activity of reading and on literature as a mode of knowledge. The fact that the name

of Roland Barthes has been mentioned more than once in the course of these pages shows yet again the relevance to contemporary concerns of Alain's thinking on this subject. The point cannot be over-stressed that literature for Alain is not a means to an end, not a means of acquiring information, but an activity to be indulged in for its own sake. For him a book is not necessarily a pretext for writing another book, as a novel of Balzac's was for the "Sorbonagre". Rather than follow the latter's example, Alain strove to emulate Rousseau for whom the activity of reading was an end in itself: "Jean-Jacques, aux Charmettes," we learn in one of the "propos", "lisait pour lire et pensait pour penser ... Sans but, n'ayant pas l'idée qu'il dût jamais écrire une ligne."<sup>1</sup>

It would be an easy task to make out a case for Alain as a poet, as a philosopher, or as a literary critic, but to do this would be to contradict the very spirit of his thought which yields more fruit to those interested in his attitude and approach to intellectual activity than to those intent on fitting him into a ready-made category. His greatest merit, in my opinion, is that he pointed to the limits of the scientific method, questioned the status of theories, re-appraised the role of language, and in so doing showed the direction in which the philosopher and literary critic would do well to move.

A few years ago the Association des Amis d'Alain asked its members for their opinions on "l'actualité d'Alain". Faithful to the spirit of Alain's thought, Georges Pascal questioned the value of "actualité" in the domain of ideas in his reply: "En un sens parler de l'actualité d'Alain ce serait nier qu'il fut un philosophe. Ce qui, dans le passé, vous

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1. Propos II, p. 189.

paraît être d'actualité, c'est toujours ce qui s'accorde avec quelque mode présente, et qui sera donc renvoyé demain à l'oubli."<sup>1</sup> We are reminded here of the scorn Alain himself entertained for all those anxious to refute their predecessors and discover new ideas. Commenting on the same occasion on the relevance of Alain's thought today, André Buffard speaks scathingly of current intellectual fashions, showing the irrelevance of "actualité" in the case of one such as Alain:

Parmi les innombrables plunitifs qui se prennent pour les prophètes des temps nouveaux, enfileurs infatigables de statistiques, commentateurs dévotieux de textes multicolores et coupeurs de cheveux en quatre, il y a des gens qui, au nom d'Alain, lèvent un sourcil étonné: "Alain? Connais pas! C'est si loin Alain."

....

Donc, pour certains pédants de lettres, Alain n'est pas d'actualité bien qu'on le voie cité partout, en France et ailleurs; que, partout, des travaux soient consacrés à l'étude de son œuvre; bien que d'innombrables esprits vivent et se réconfortent à l'abri et dans la sécurité de sa pensée.<sup>2</sup>

Alain is indeed frequently quoted in France, both in philosophical and literary reviews and in the popular press. Thanks to the conciseness of his style and the striking way in which he expresses himself, his thought lends itself to quotation and this was a quality which Alain himself admired in the great classical writers whose memorable phrases were for him, as are many of Alain's for us today, "des centres de méditation".<sup>3</sup> Alain may not be popular in French academic circles now, but it is some consolation to know that his texts are still much sought after by countless people who are not dazzled by the intellectual fashions of the moment. As these two replies suggest, "actualité" is indeed a questionable virtue, and although in the course of these pages I have referred to the fact that Alain anticipated many modern developments in literary and language studies, I

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1. B.A.A.A. (janvier 1972), p. 44.

2. Ibid., pp. 26-27.

3. P.L., p. 68 (Propos I, p. 374).

believe that his greatest claim to originality lies, paradoxically, in his refusal to be original, and in the attitude and working method he consequently adopted.

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